Boogie Woogie Hanon

Authentic, progressive exercises and etudes for the contemporary piano student by Leo Alfassy.
Theory • Development • Application

Boogie Woogie Hanon

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by Leo Alfassy.

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Contents

Introduction	7
Elements of Boogie Style	9
Melody	9
Grace Notes, Slides, and Tremolos	10
Harmony and Form	11
Bass Line	12
Meter and Rhythm	12
Introductions and Endings	13
Exercises Part I	15
Exercises Part II	57

Introduction

The boogie-woogie is a heavily percussive piano style, characterized by short melodic phrases of great rhythmic variety (riffs) played against a constantly reiterated (ostinato) bass pattern with hands usually far apart. Although intrinsically connected with the blues, the boogie possesses an idiomatic language of its own and reveals major differences between the two styles.

The blues, basically a vocal composition which originated in the Mississippi delta region, sang of a life close to the bone; it reflected the earthiness of life, rootlessness, death, and depression. For that reason, the blues is usually in a slow tempo and on a medium dynamic level. On the other hand, the boogie is an instrumental style usually in a fast tempo, and the dynamic level is quite high. The incredible vitality and excitement of its hypnotic, repeated rhythmic patterns won world-wide popularity and accounts for the numerous revivals during the last decades.

The emergence of the boogie as an identifiable entity is very difficult to determine, mainly because it was kept alive by oral tradition. Around 1900, when musicology was in its infancy, very few ethnomusicologists realized that the musical heritage of the non-western world merited scientific research. The first field recordings, made in America by Fewkes and Gilman at the end of the nineteenth century, concentrated more on the music of the American Indian but showed little interest in black music. Therefore, we must rely on the memory of the very few musicians still living and other chroniclers, whose vague recollections offer little accurate information about the first steps of this authentic American art form.

The origins of blues and boogie can be traced back to the turn of the century, when the agricultural South was gradually industrialized and when itinerant black workers found jobs in lumber camps and other plants. This environment and the sordid slums of the northern and midwest cities of the early twentieth century attracted many pianists, who played endless hours in dark juke joints and barrelhouses (cheap drinking establishments with barrels stacked along the walls for sitting purposes and a dirt floor for dancing). In these barrelhouses, as well as in dimly lit bars and rent house parties, was created the first barrelhouse blues style. The self-taught boogie pioneers had to create by trial and error a new pianistic language suitable to the rough audience and to the mechanical conditions of the dilapidated instruments. As a result, a new piano style developed based on simple single-note melodic phrases and a repetitious rhythmic bass pattern.

In the early 1920s, after the closing of the red district in New Orleans, many black musicians moved north along the Mississippi River and created new jazz centers, especially in Kansas City, Memphis, St. Louis, and Chicago. It was in Chicago that a new generation of pianists with musical schooling developed a richer harmonic and stylistic vocabulary, introducing the boogie into more respectable establishments and into the recording studios. The two greatest popularizers of this style were Meade "Lux" Lewis and Clarence "Pine Top" Smith, who is credited with inventing the name "boogie-woogie."

In the 1930s, such pianists as Cow-Cow Davenport, Jimmy Yancey, Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson, etc., gained national attention, establishing the golden era of boogie. The second half of the 1940s saw the development of a more sophisticated style, especially after the introduction of electrically amplified instruments in the jazz bands. A last revival ushered in great artists like Blind Lemon Jefferson, Leadbelly, Sunnyland Slim, Piano Red, etc., but also a growing commercialization. The 1950s witnessed a rapid decline of the boogie and the emergence of rock 'n roll, but there is no doubt that the latter is strongly indebted to the former, especially concerning the eighth-note rhythmic and the twelve-bar formal structures. Even nowadays one can find many rock and disco numbers containing the name "boogie" in their titles.

The music in this book is divided into two parts. The exercises in the first part are devoted primarily to the development of the agility and evenness of the finger action of the left hand. The basic boogie patterns are presented in C major and in order of increasing difficulty—from the simplest quarter-note figure to the most elaborate dotted eighth-note bass line.

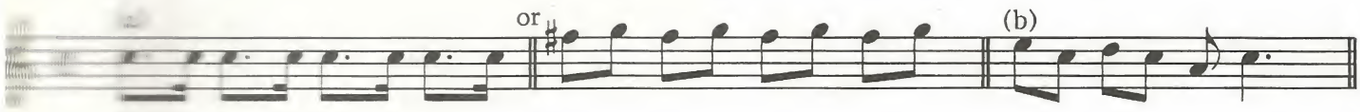
The second part covers the most important melodic patterns of the boogie as performed by the greatest pianists in the field. This idiomatic melodic language is superimposed upon the familiar bass patterns from the first part, but transposed into the most frequently-used keys. In this section also are the exercises needed for the absolute independence, and at the same time coordination, of both hands. Because the playing of boogie-woogie requires an extraordinary independence of hands, it is absolutely necessary to practice each hand separately. It is also strongly advised not to use the right pedal, which would destroy the intrinsic worth of this particular piano style. Instead, the student can keep a steady tempo by tapping the beat with his right foot.

The first few sections explain the characteristic features of the boogie in relation to the basic elements of music. They also contain examples of typical introductions and endings, as well as performance practices.

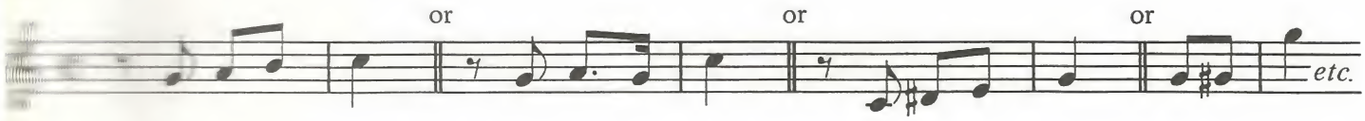
Elements of Boogie Style

Melody

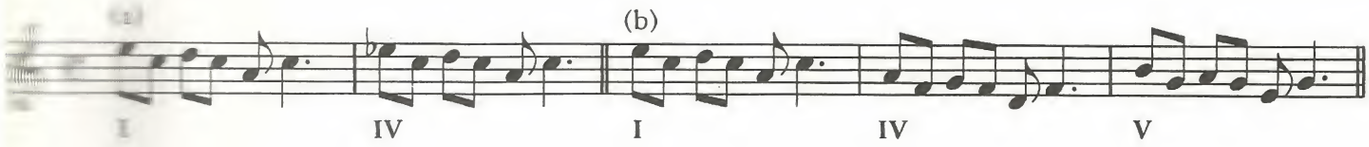
The melodic line of the boogie cannot be described, in a strict sense, as a succession of single tones perceived by the mind as a unity. The characteristic boogie melody consists either of a short motive reiterated in innumerable rhythmic variations, or of a succession of disparate motivic fragments combined in a twelve-bar formal structure. A motive can consist of only one or two notes constantly repeated (a), or it can be a short musical phrase (b).



Very often several initial eighth notes precede the melody in form of an upbeat.



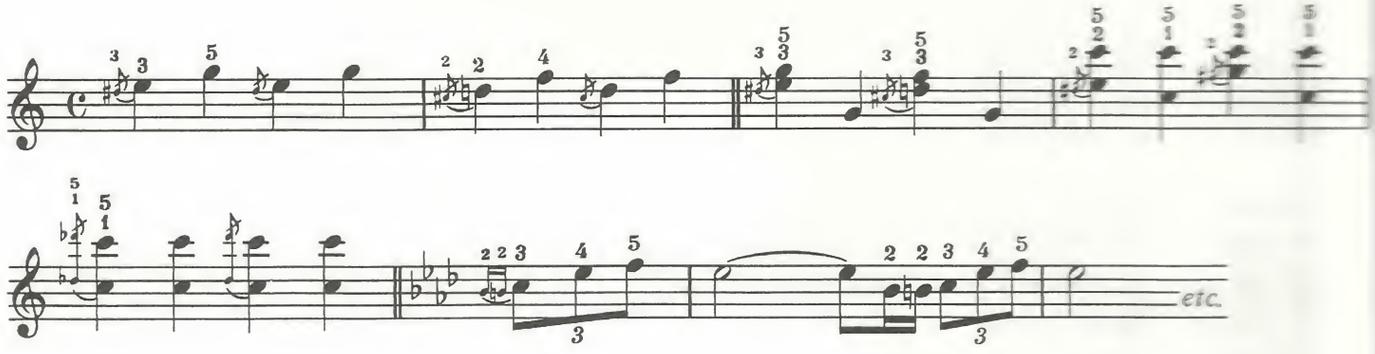
In order to follow the changing harmony, musical phrases can be altered chromatically (a), or transposed to another pitch above or below (b).



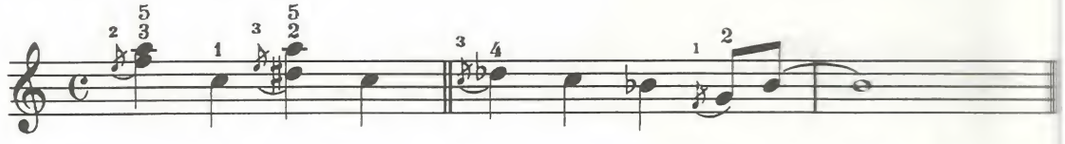
The melodic line often contains melodic features typical of the blues, namely the so-called "blue" notes. These are notes, particularly the third and seventh degrees of the scale, whose intonation lies *between* the major and the minor pitches. In blues singing, these notes could be easily performed by the singer or played on the guitar, the most important instrument for blues accompaniment. In order to imitate the blue notes which were impossible to play on a keyboard instrument, the boogie pianists had to develop a special technique of embellishments consisting of grace notes and slides.

Grace Notes, Slides, and Tremolos

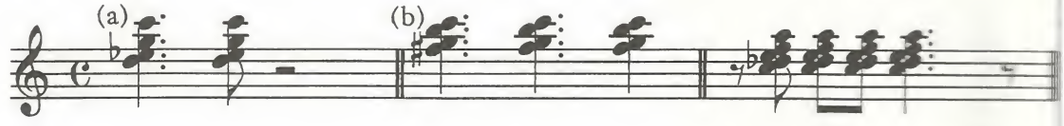
In classical music, the time value of a grace note (note printed in small type) must be subtracted from that of the preceding or following notes. In the interpretation of boogie, the value of the grace note is extremely short—in other words, the grace note and the adjacent note are played almost simultaneously *on* the beat. This extremely short value is achieved through the sliding of the same finger from a black to a white key on the keyboard.



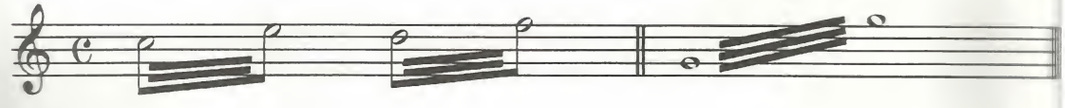
Because it is impossible to slide with the same finger from one white to another white key, or from a white to a black key, two fingers are necessary to perform the grace note and the adjacent note.



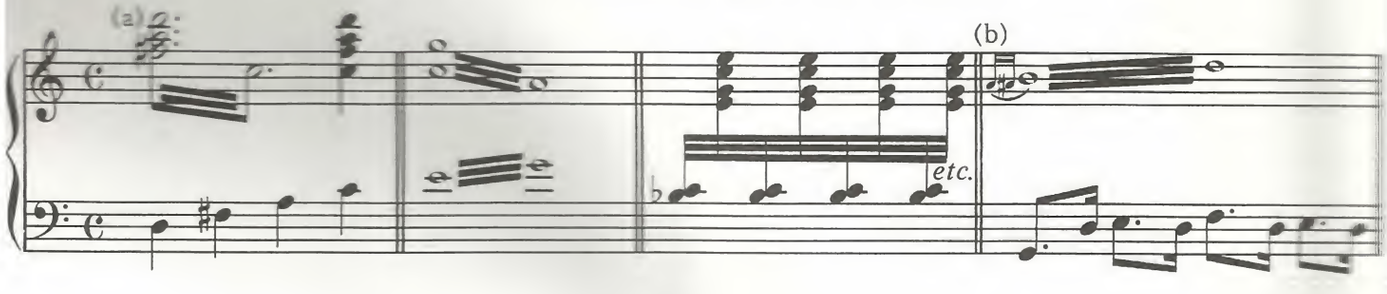
To create an even greater illusion of guitar playing, the blues pianist often strikes simultaneously two notes situated a semitone apart (a). The agglomeration of a few semitones in the same chord, called "tone cluster," adds more excitement to the inherent drive of the boogie (b).



The tremolo is a device frequently used in boogie. It occurs in the form of quickly repeated notes, mostly thirds and octaves.

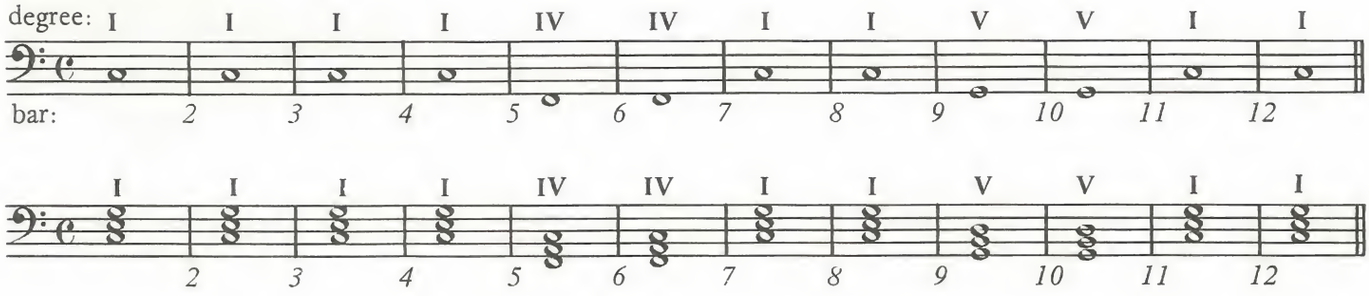


Sometimes the tremolo consists of whole chords, performed with one or both hands (a). Very often it is preceded by grace notes or slurs (b).

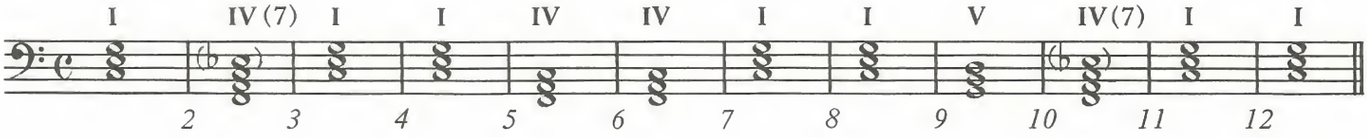


Harmony and Form

The harmonic and formal structures of the boogie are the same as the blues. Every composition consists of a succession of twelve-bar sections called "choruses," each section containing an identical harmonic pattern. This pattern is based on the triads built over the first (tonic), fourth (subdominant), and fifth (dominant) degrees of the scale. Here is the formal and harmonic structure of a typical blues or boogie in the key of C.

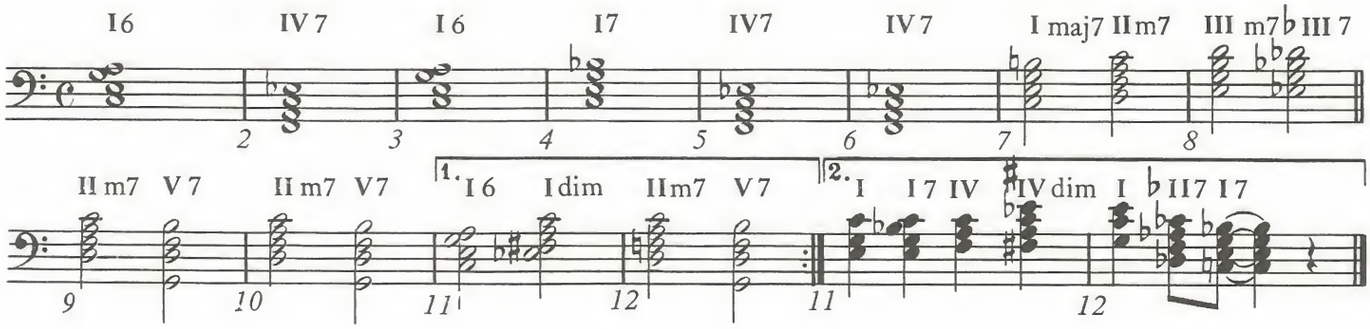


Sometimes the tonic triads of measures 2 and 10 are replaced by the subdominant triad or a dominant seventh chord.



There are many exceptions to this basic harmonic pattern. The great performers of blues and boogie use sophisticated chords, tone clusters, and strikingly original harmonic progressions within this fundamental framework.

Here is a modern version of the blues (or boogie) form. Note the characteristic chord progression in the last two measures.



Bass Line

The most characteristic feature of boogie is its bass line, which has to play a double role as a harmonic support, and as a replacement for the rhythm section of a band. With the exception of a few "breaks," the rhythmic pulse of the left hand is always there and has to be kept steady from beginning to end. A simple bass figure can consist of only four quarter notes per bar, or the repetition of open fifths or chords.

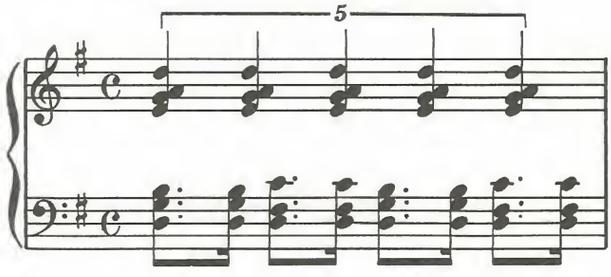
The bass line can also consist of the so-called "walking bass" (notes "walking" up and down the scale or in broken chords), probably derived from the common bass patterns of jazz bassists.

But usually the bass figure contains eight eighth notes to the bar, which is what gave boogie the name "Eight to the Bar." There are innumerable examples of bass figures, the most common of them are covered in the special exercises for the left hand.

Meter and Rhythm

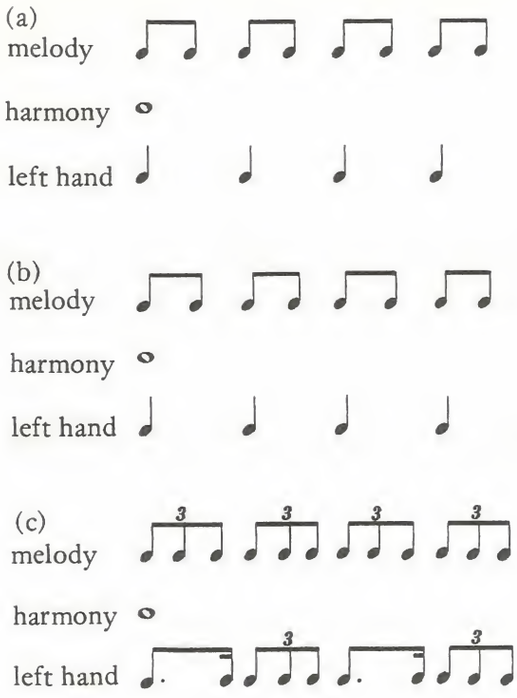
The meter of the boogie is, with rare exceptions, **C** (common) or ¢ (*alla breve*).

The rhythm in the early boogie was relatively simple: the bass figures were mostly without dotted notes, the right hand repeating short riffs over and over again. Gradually the style became more and more sophisticated, revealing sometimes an incredible polyrhythmic complexity. In some performances by famous pianists one can find three, five, or seven notes in the treble against eight notes in the bass—a rhythmic excitement rarely found in other styles.



Jazz music contains multiple layers of rhythmic activity occuring simultaneously at different rates of pulse in the main musical elements—melody, harmony, and rhythm. By contrast, what makes the boogie particularly exciting is the fact that the melody (consisting often of eighth and sixteenth notes) is superimposed upon an accompaniment which also moves fast in short time values. The harmonic progressions take place at a much slower pace—a single chord often stretched over four bars—thus creating a rhythmic counterpoint to the other faster-moving elements.

The following diagrams illustrate three typical examples of rhythmic superimposition found in the boogie-woogie.



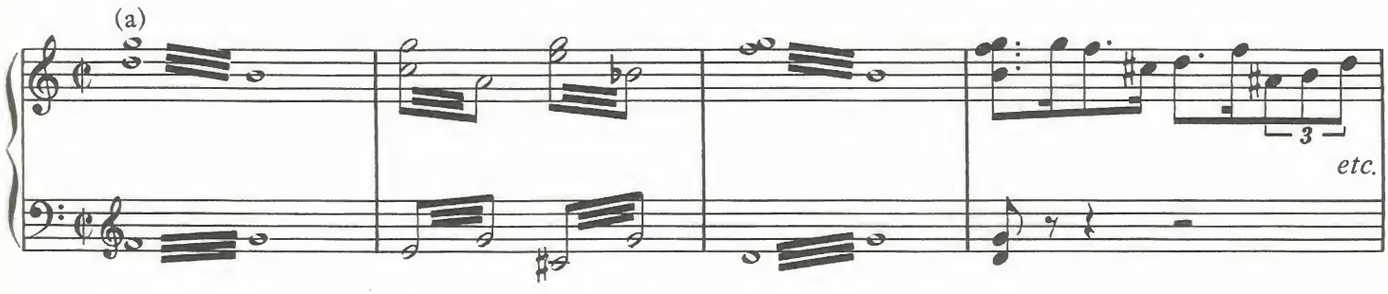
Introductions and Endings

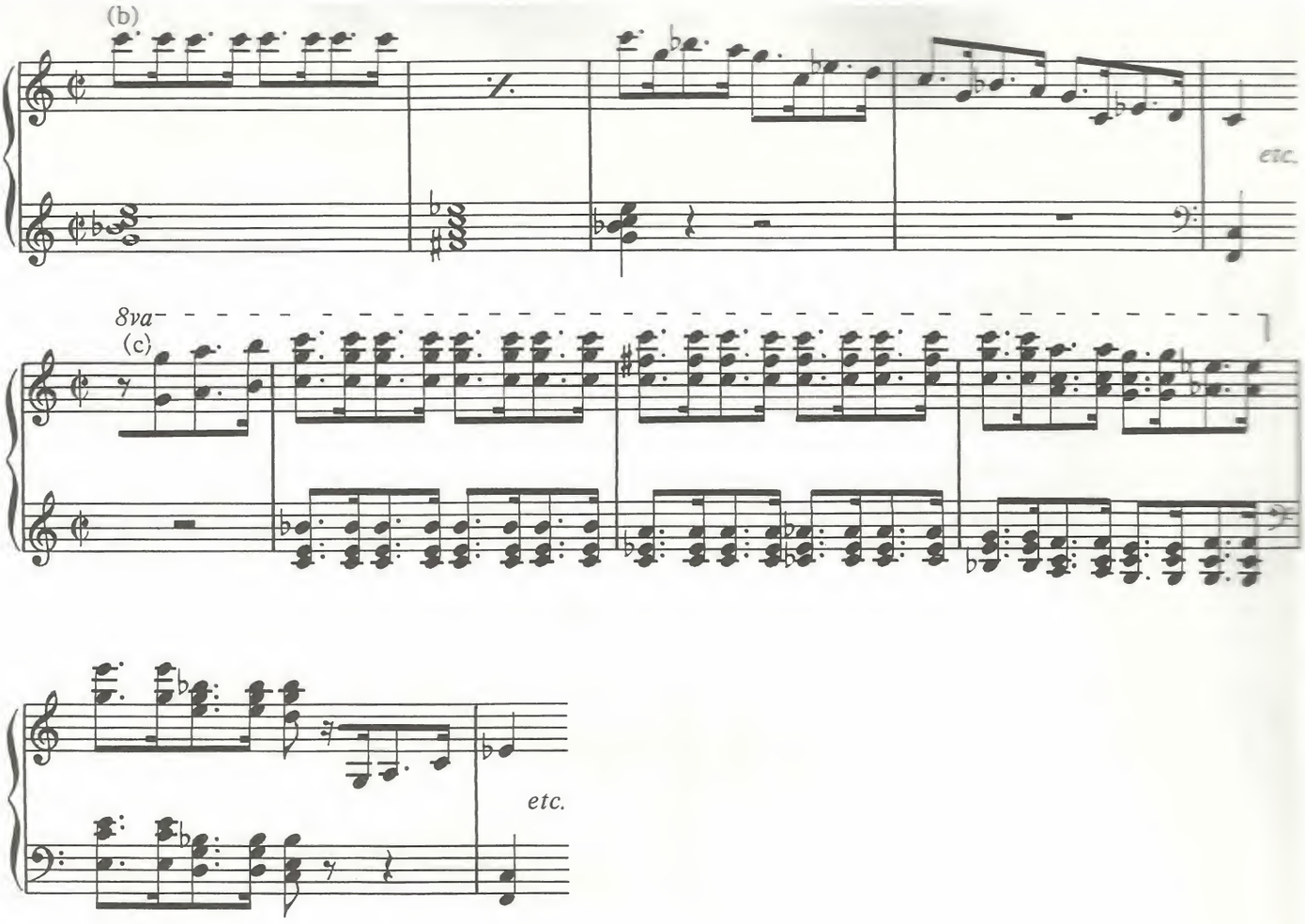
Very characteristic of the boogie is the fact that the introduction is not a special fragment preceding the chorus, but is played *instead* of the first four bars, followed by the usual eight remaining bars of the twelve-bar structure.

introduction

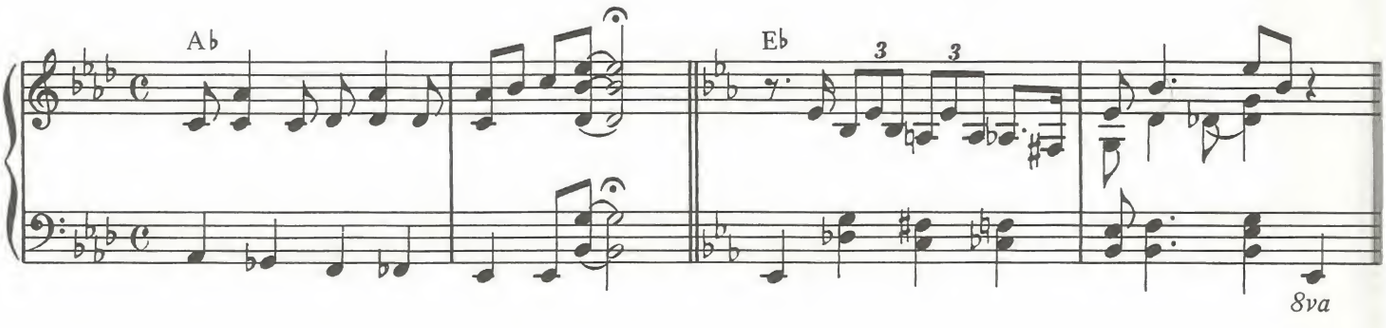
I	I	I	I	IV	IV	I	I	V	V	I	I
1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*	*11*	*12*

The introduction can consist of tremolos in both hands without a beat (a), whole-tone chords or "breaks" in the left hand (b), or a modulating passage finishing on IV (subdominant) in the fifth bar (c).





Contrary to the rules of traditional harmony, the piece can finish on a dominant seventh or other seventh chords.



Exercises—Part I

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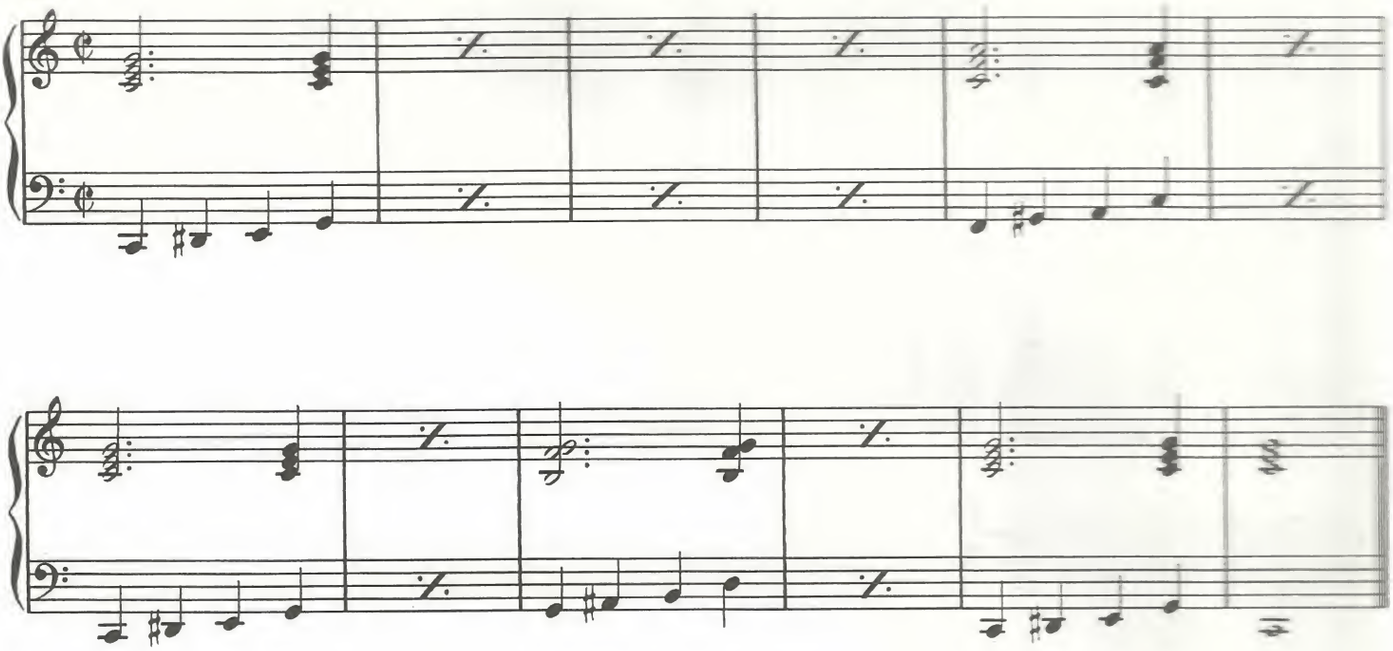

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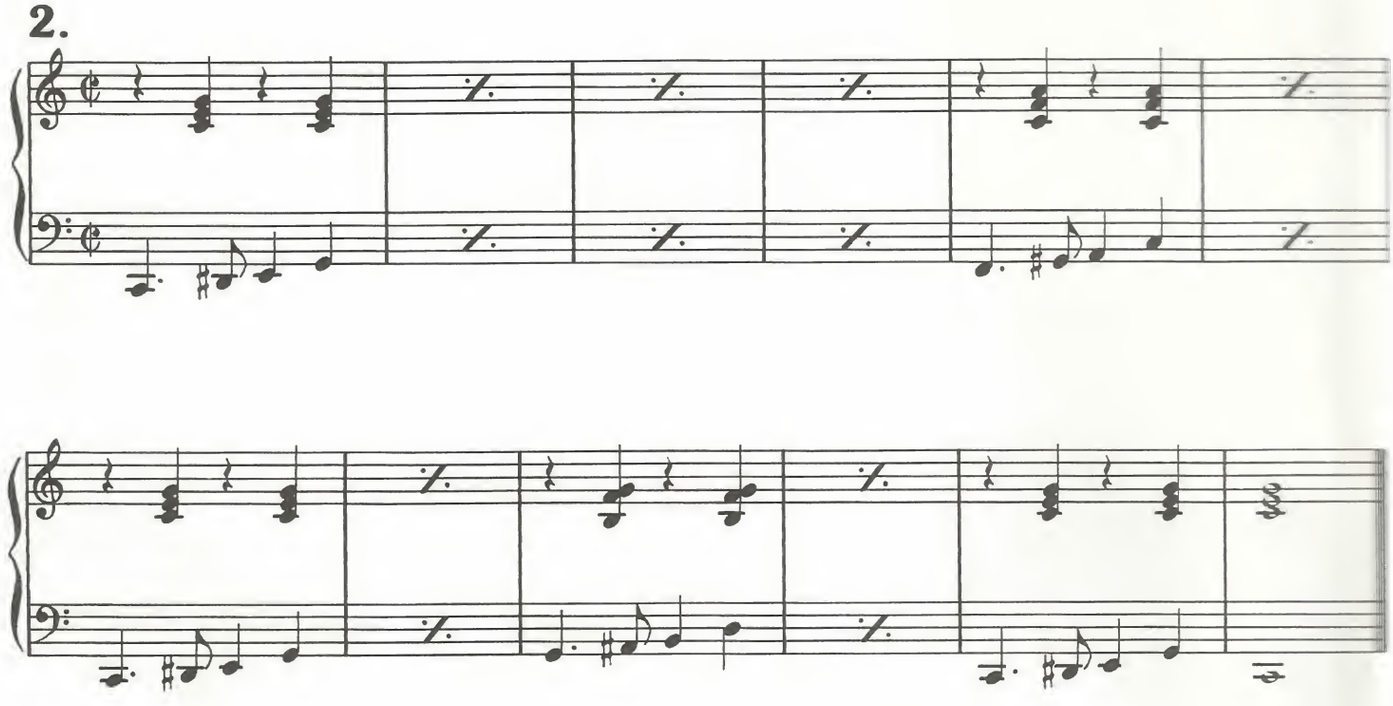

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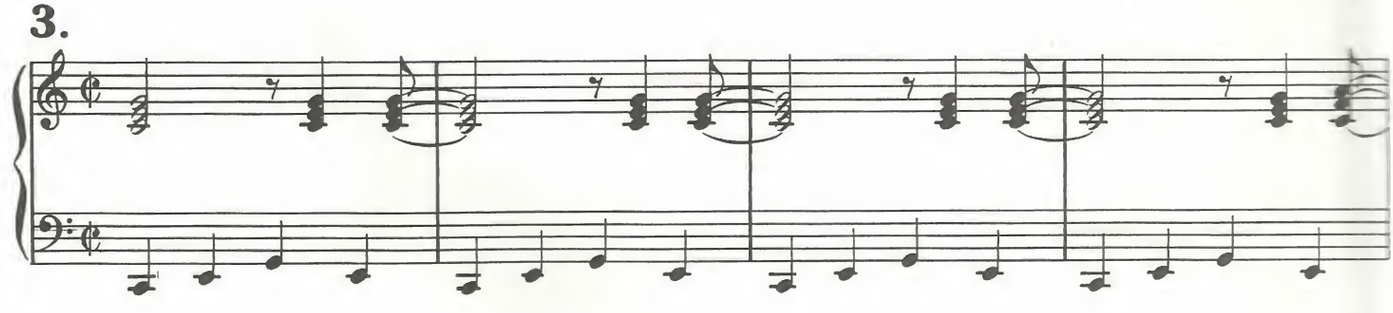

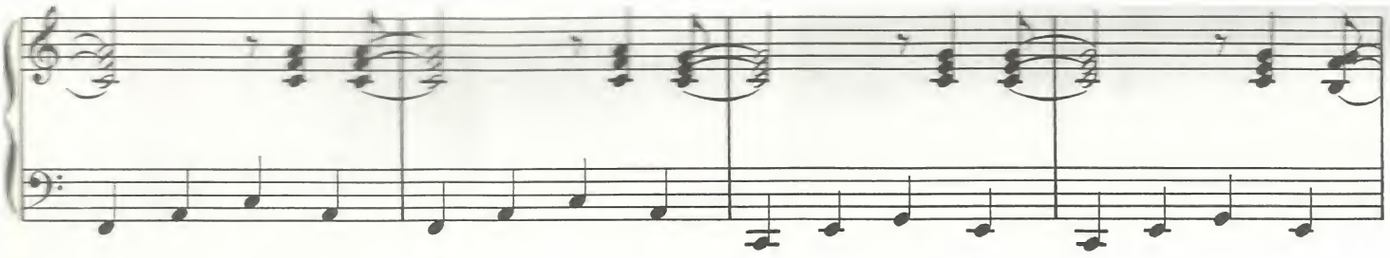

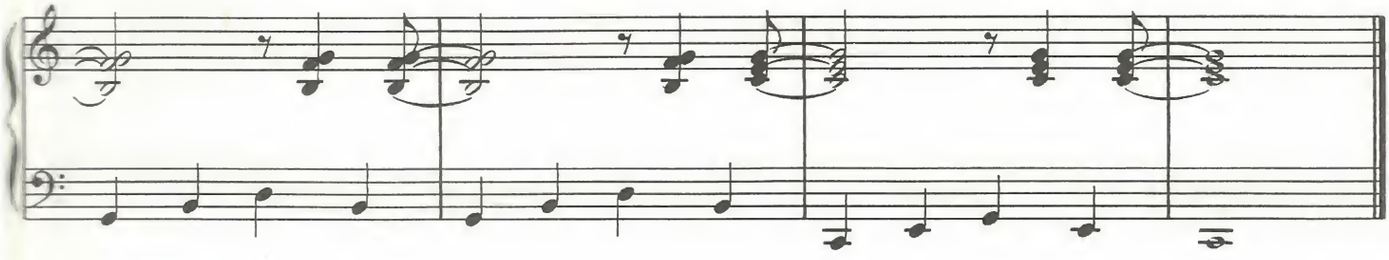

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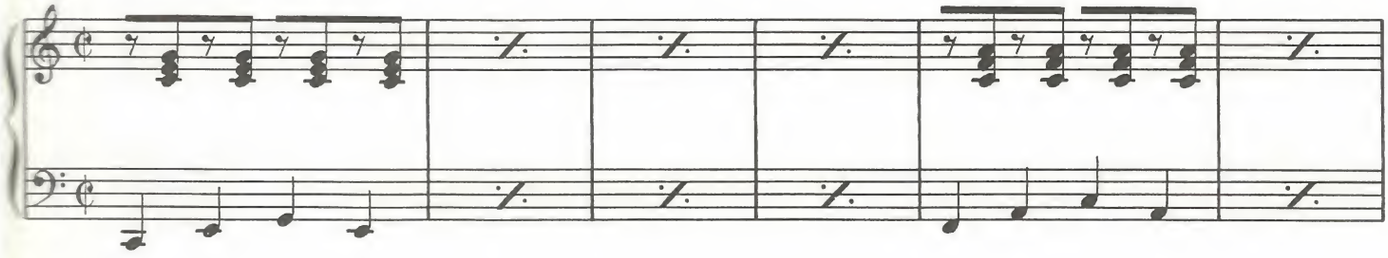

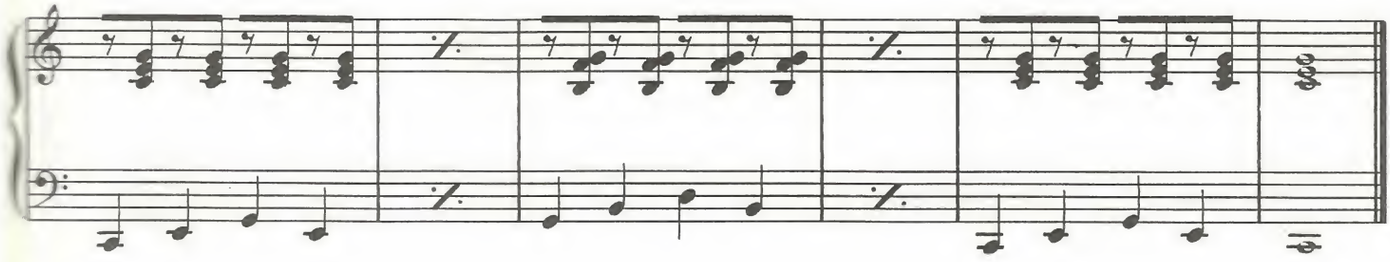

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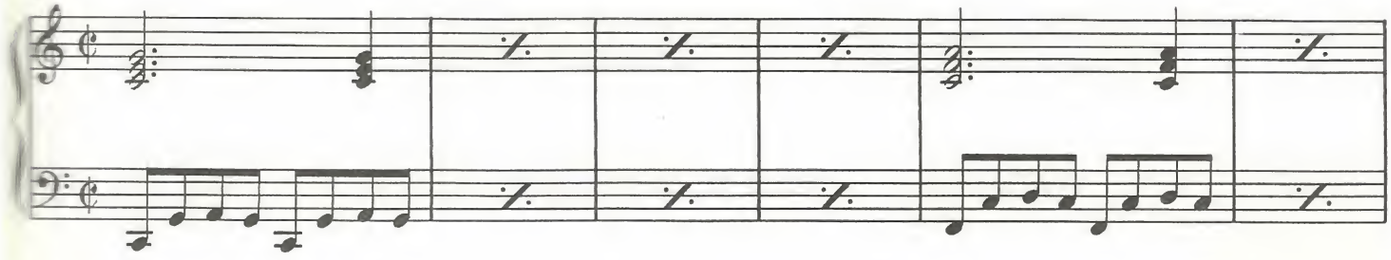

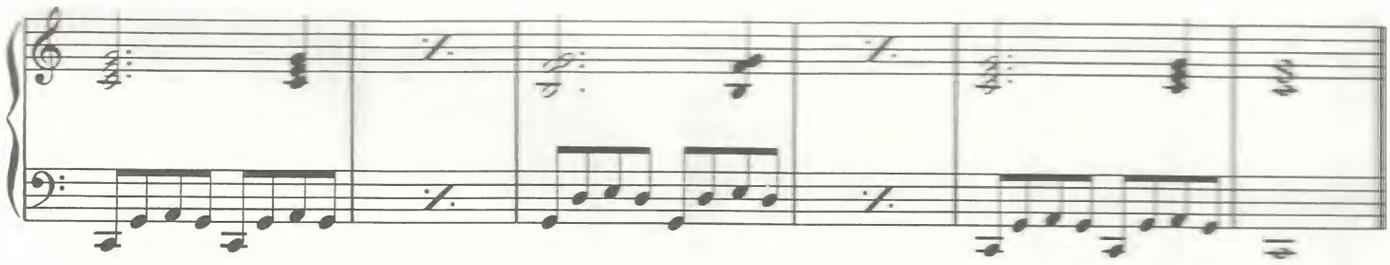

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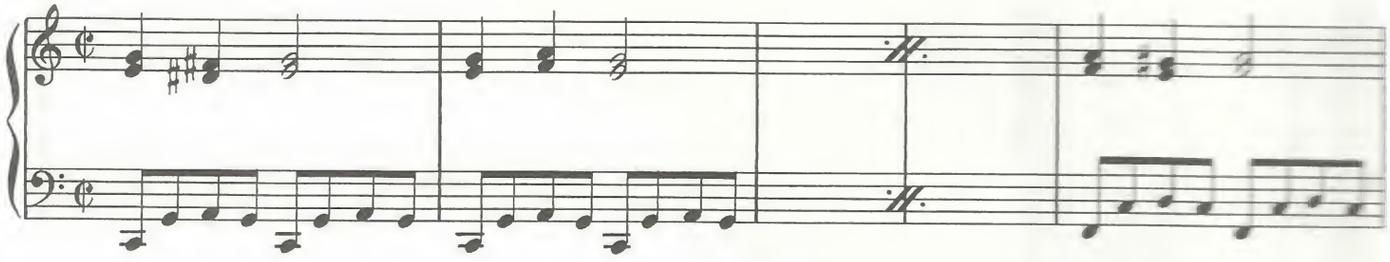

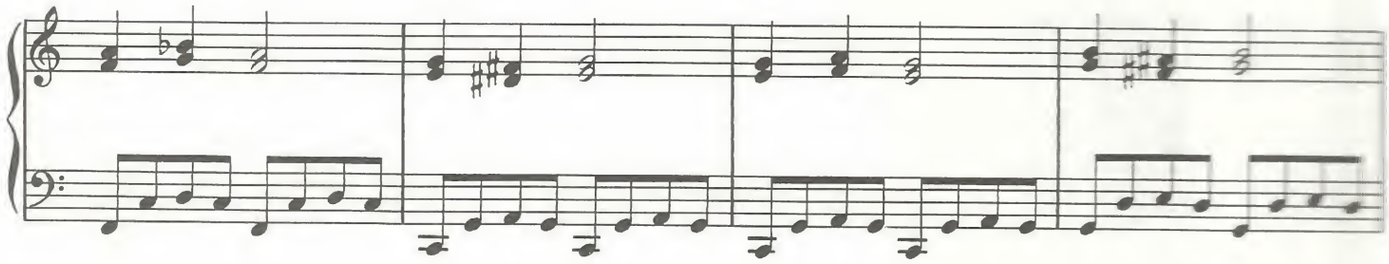

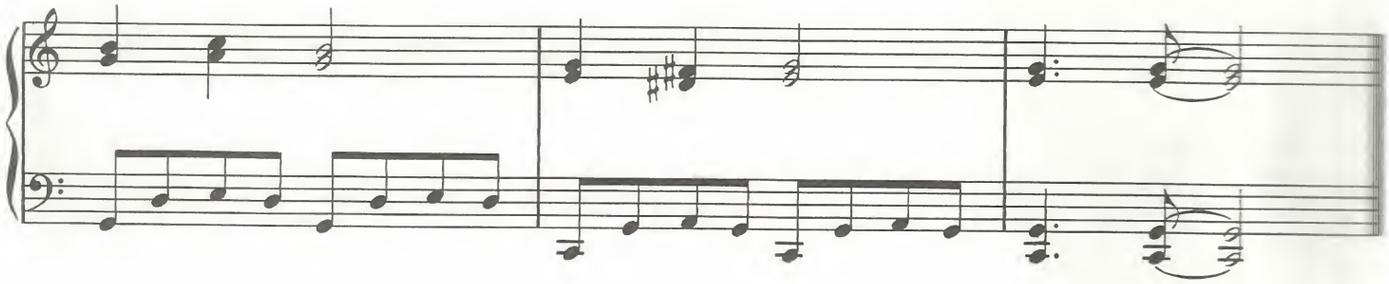

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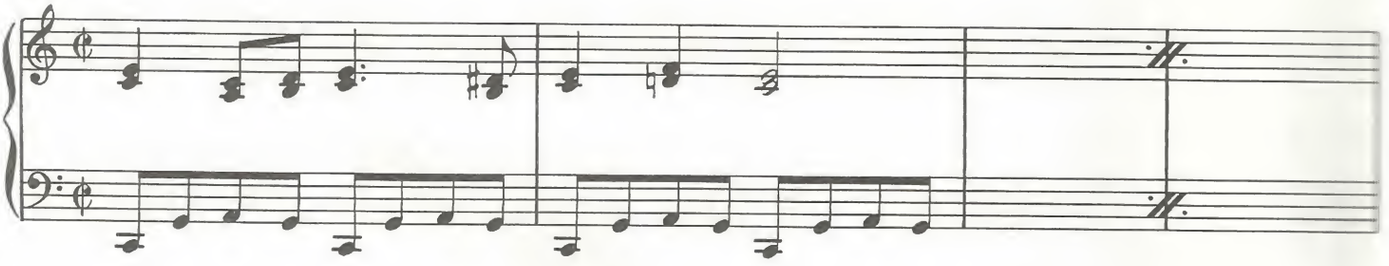

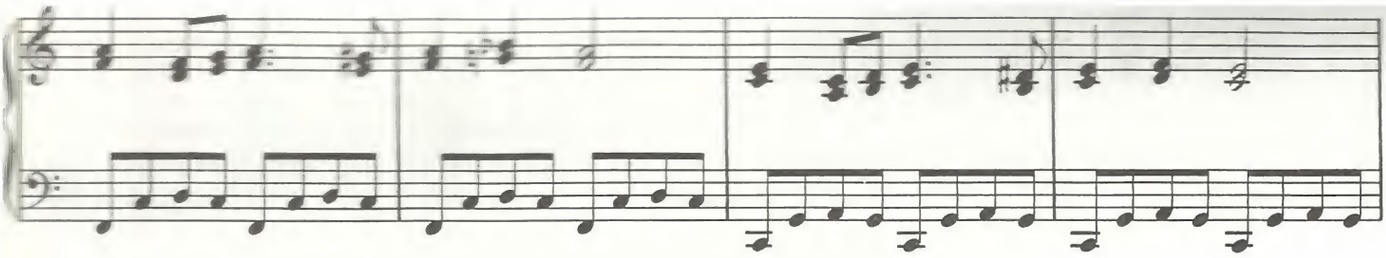

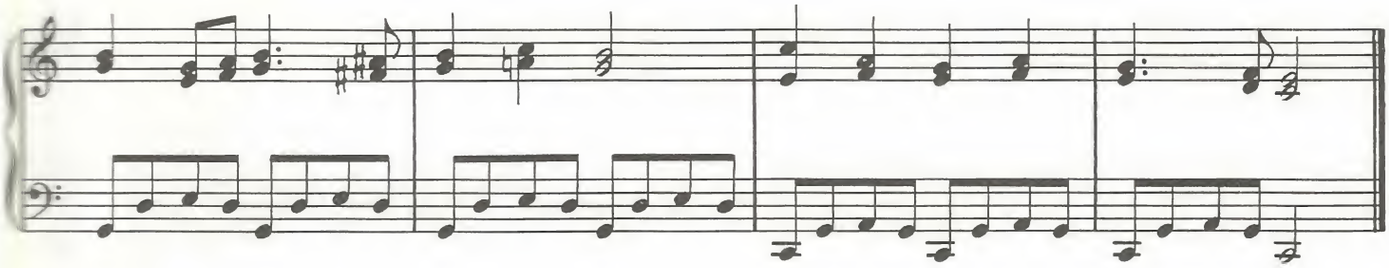

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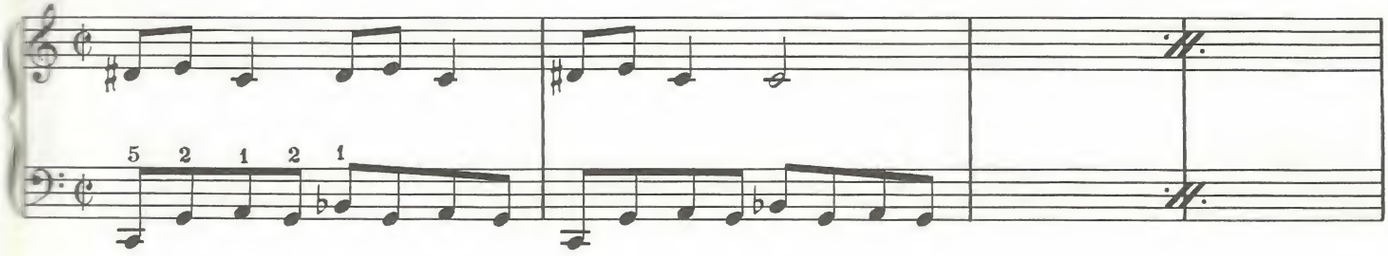

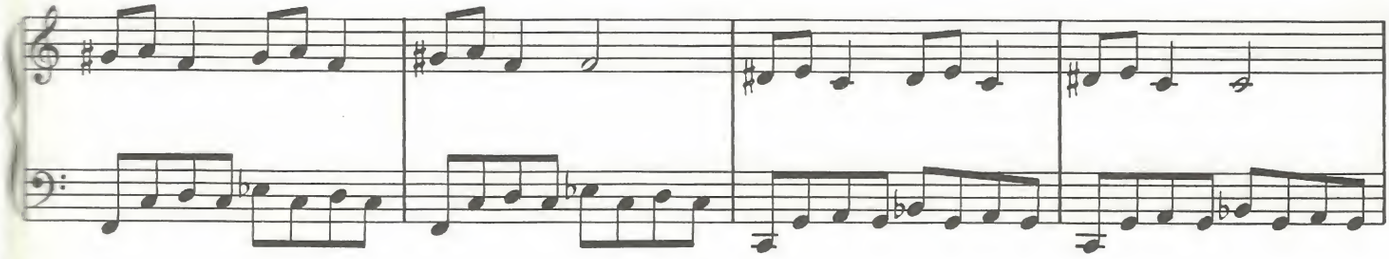

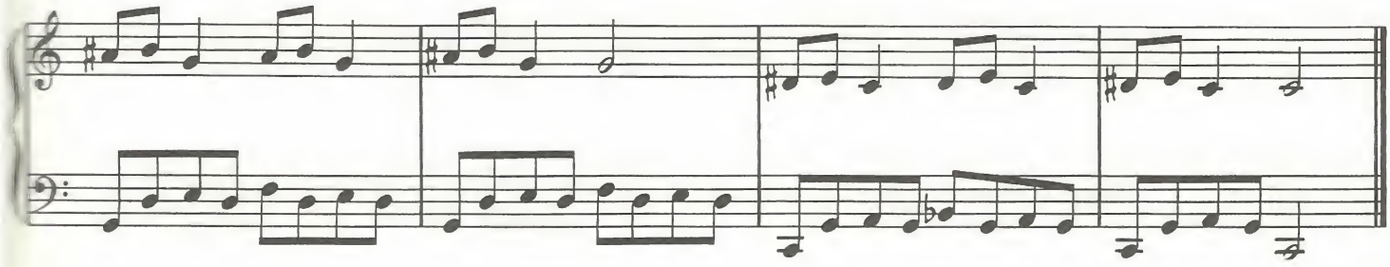

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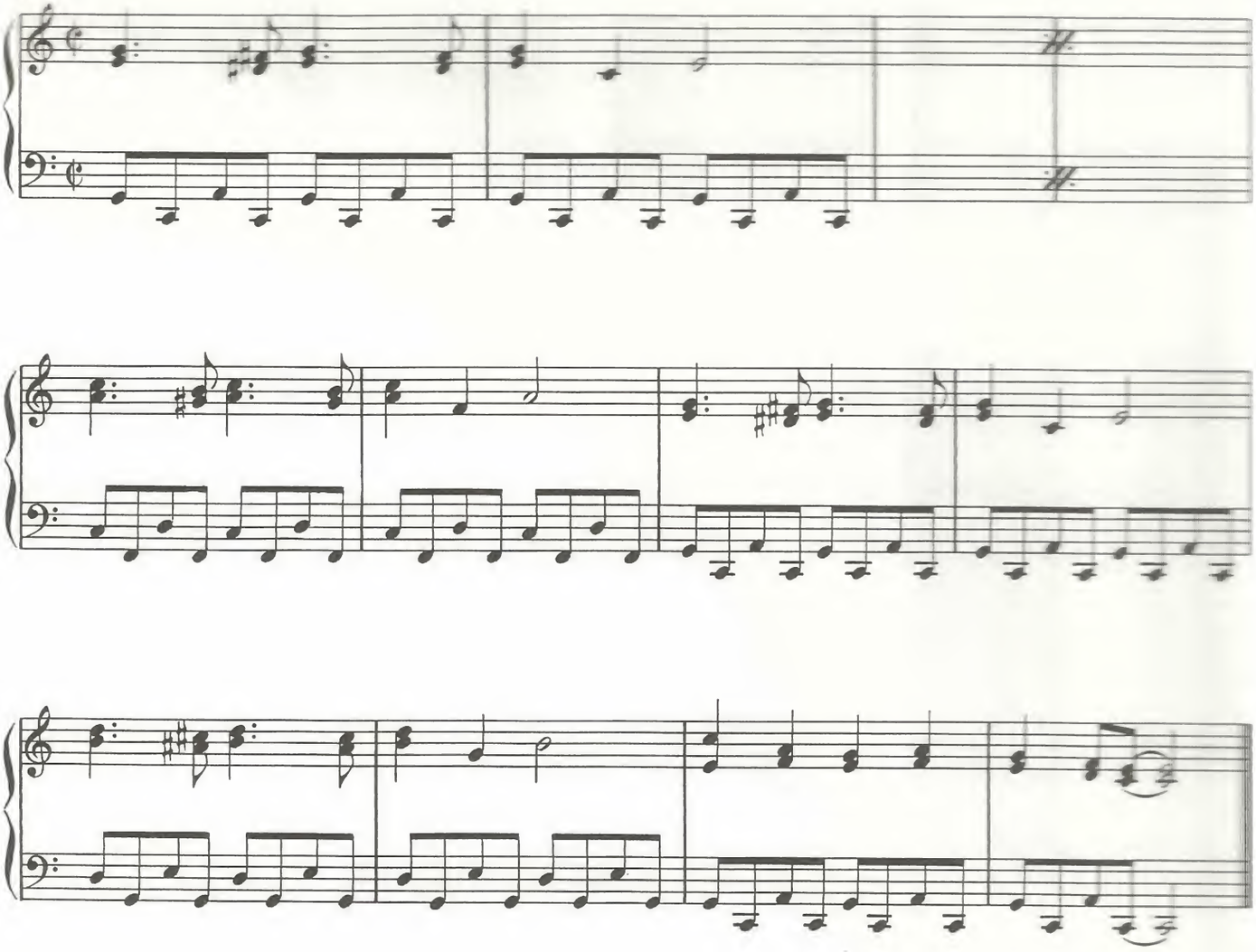

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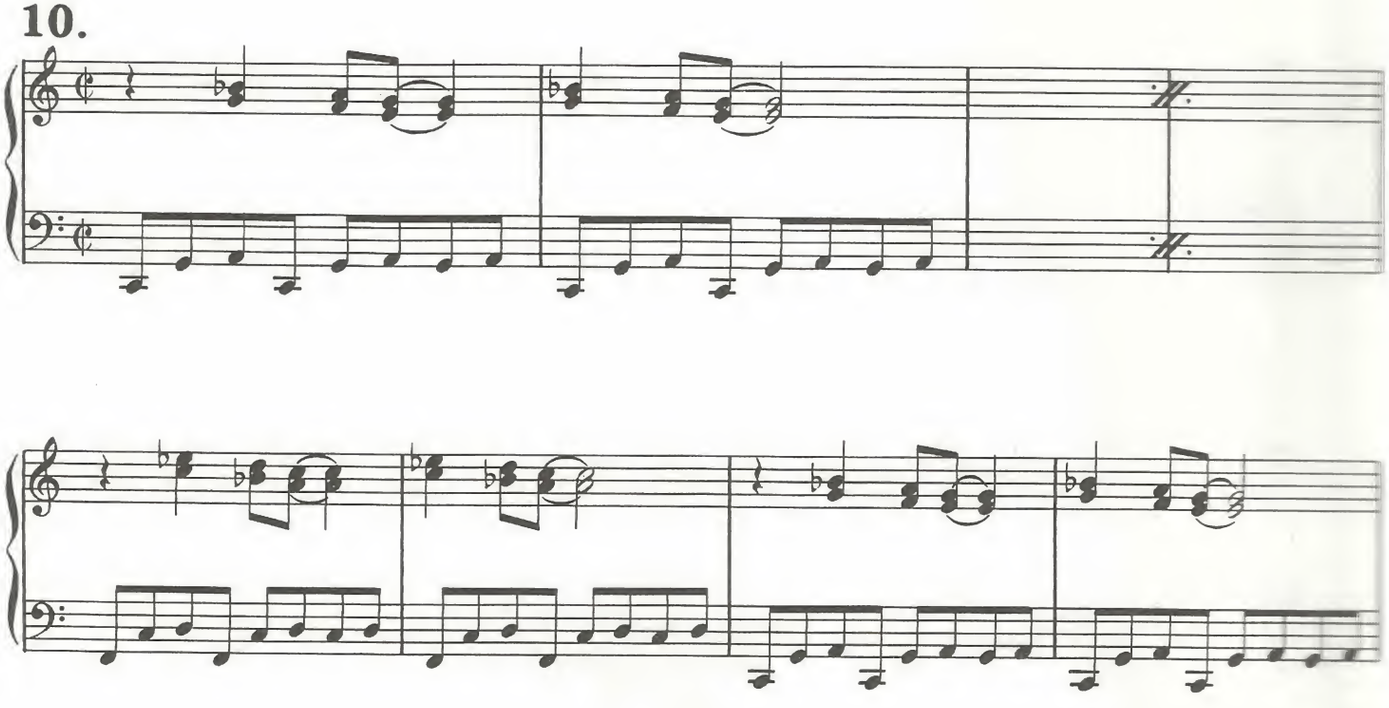

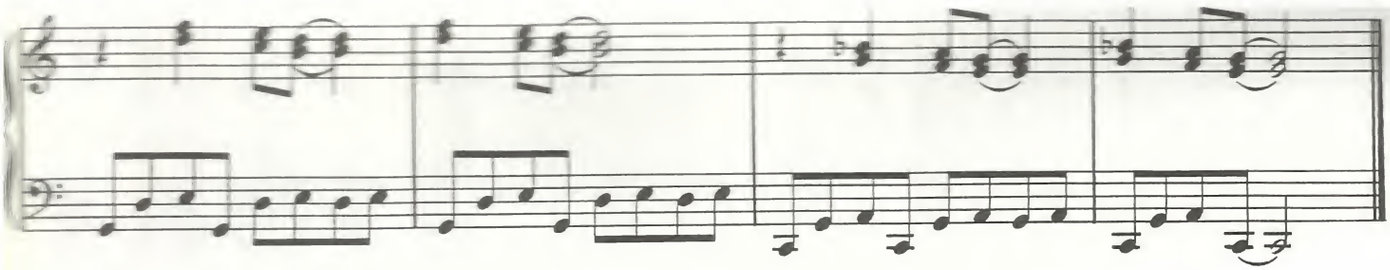

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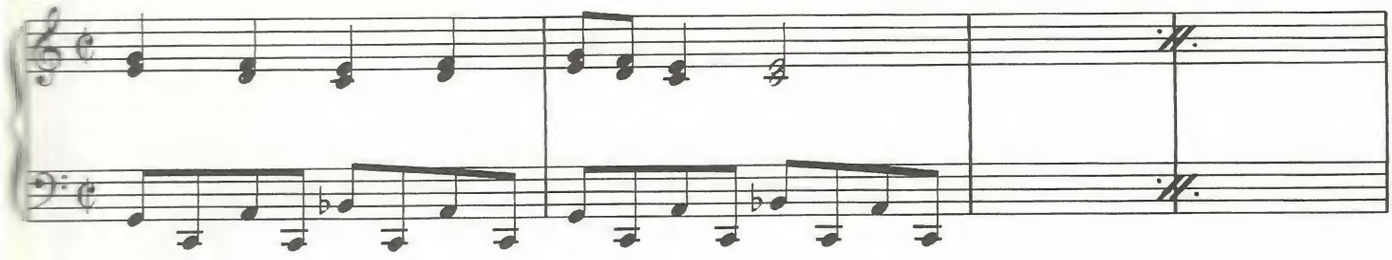

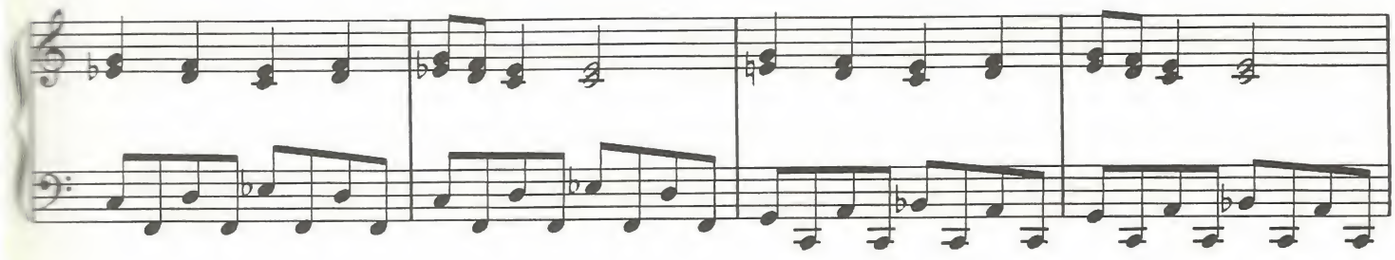

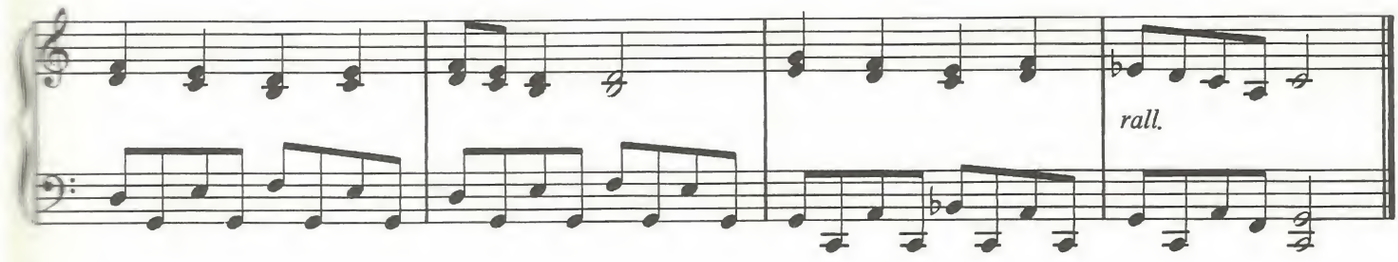

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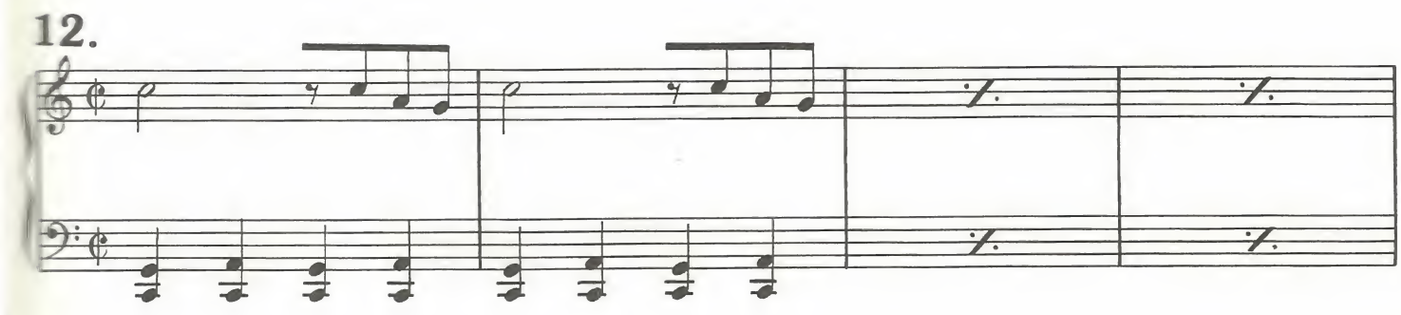

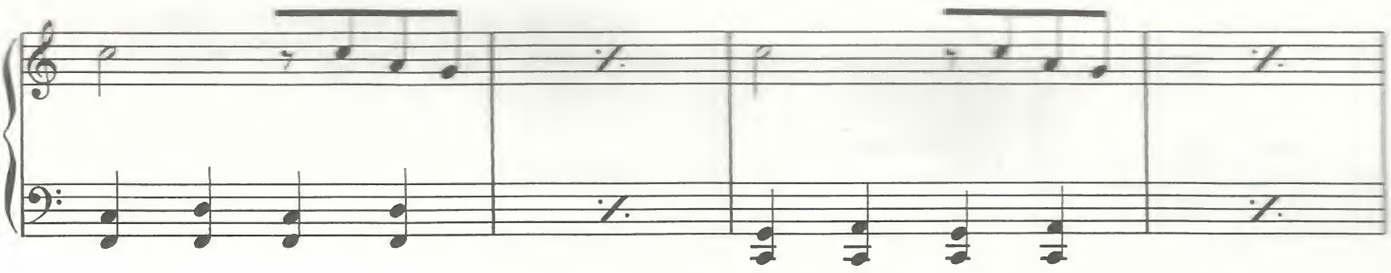

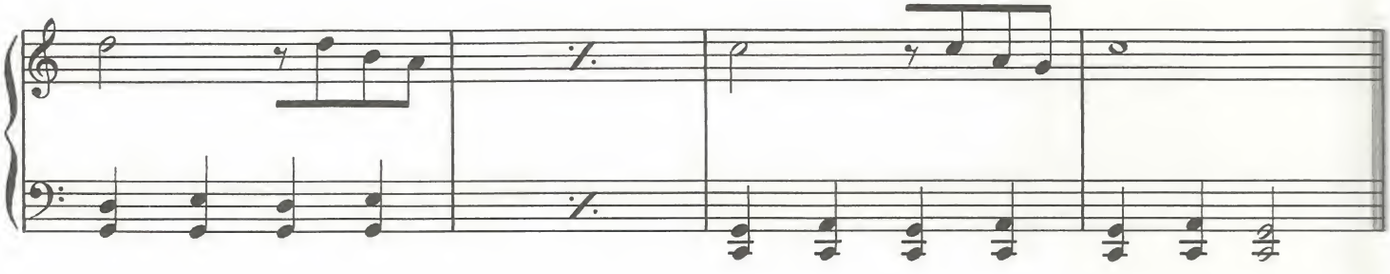

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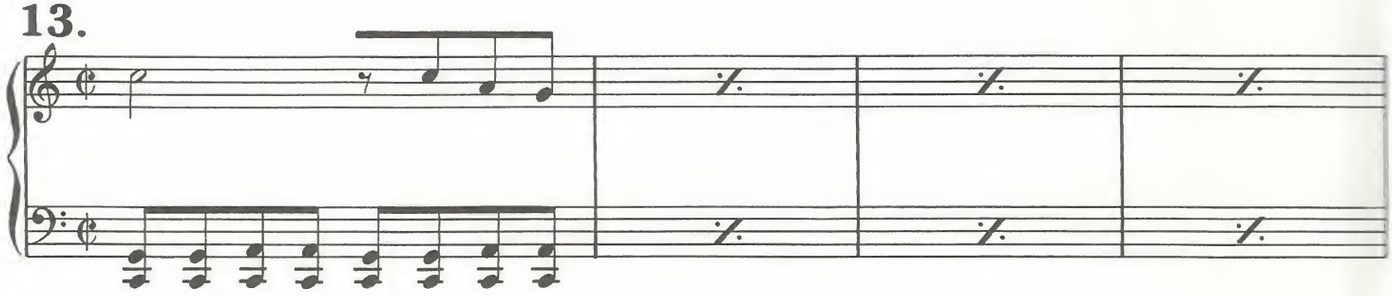

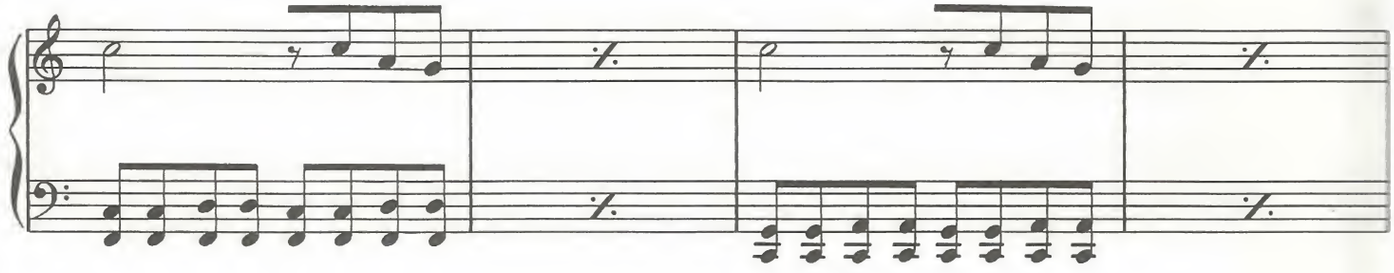

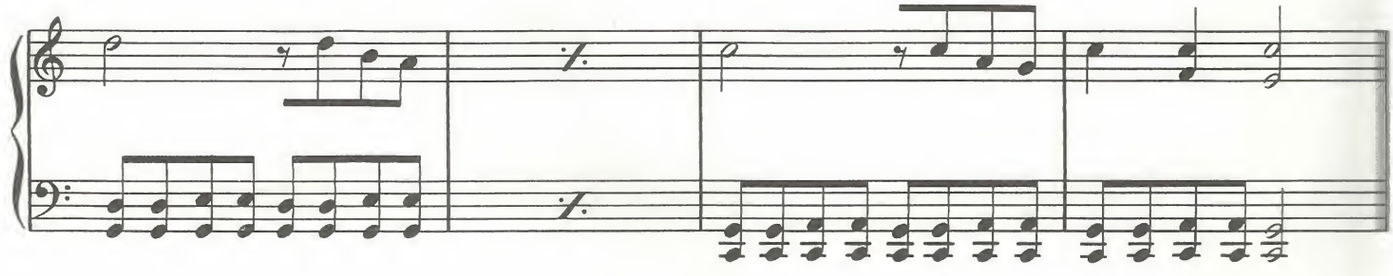

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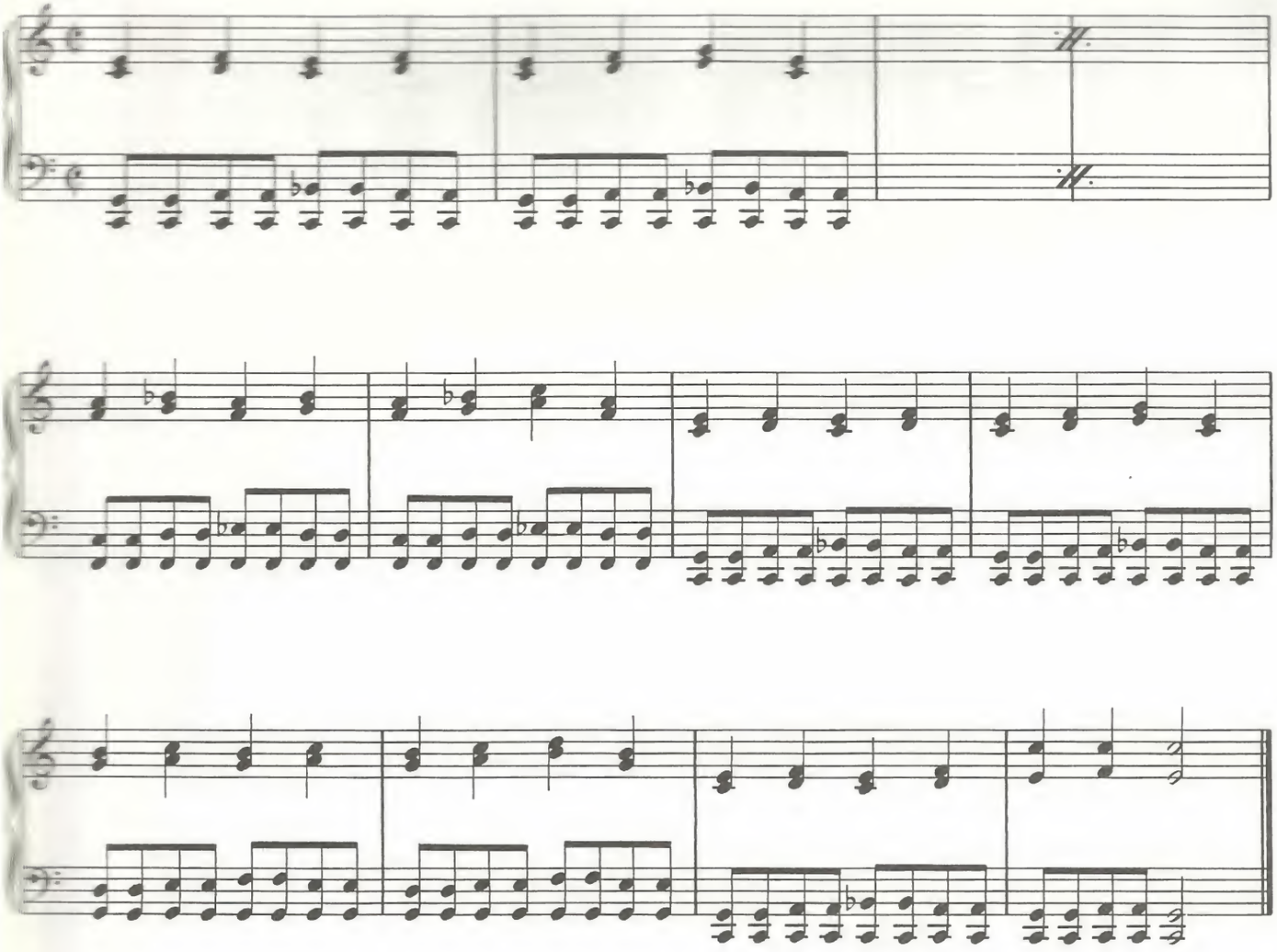

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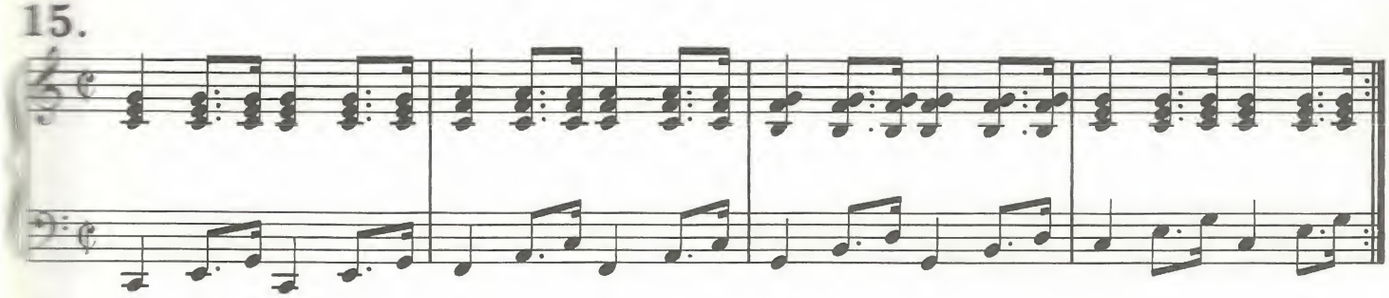

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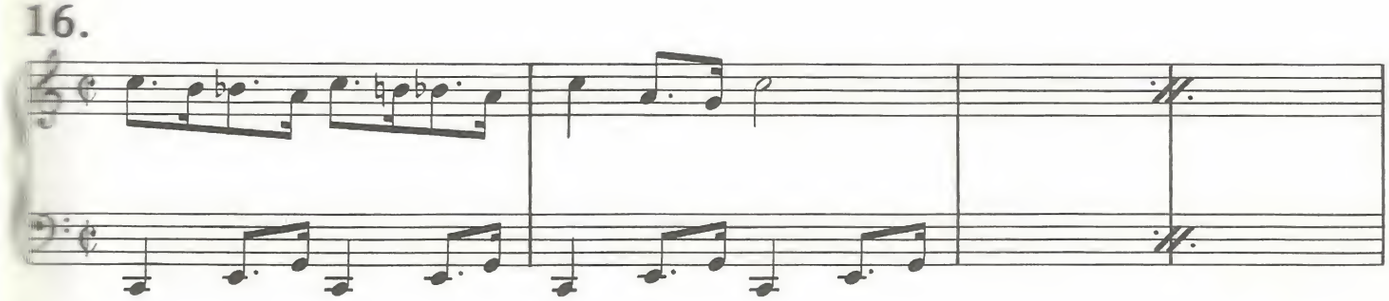

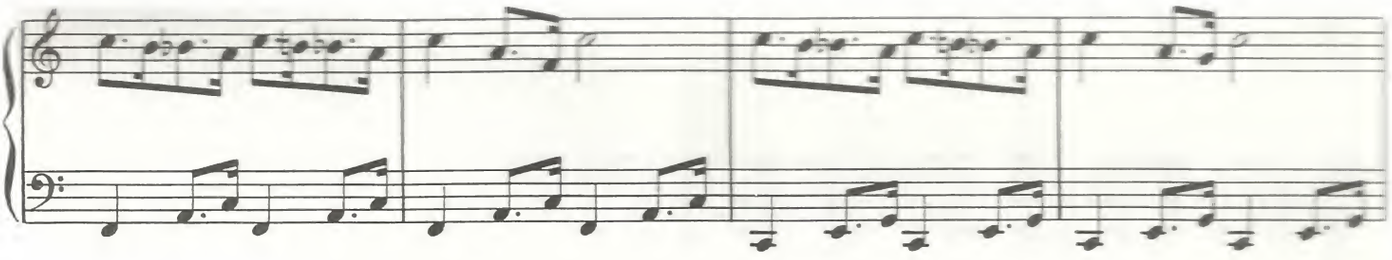

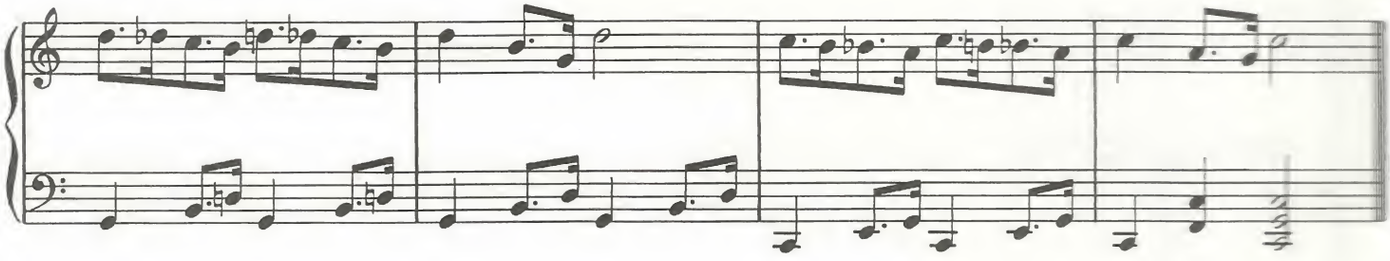

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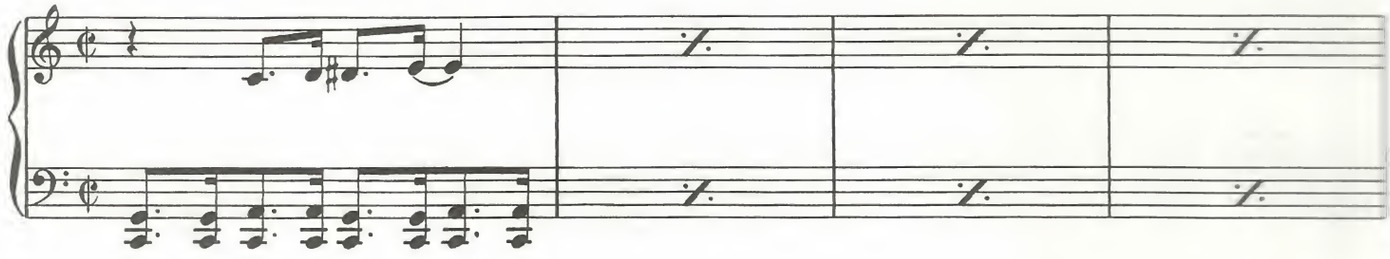

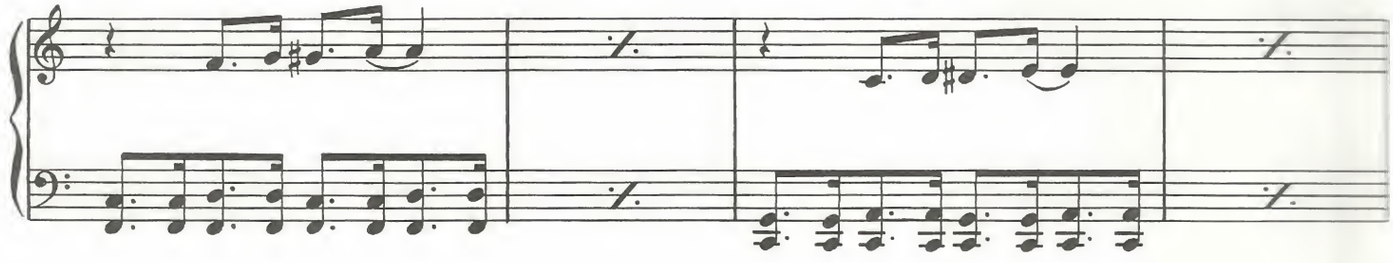

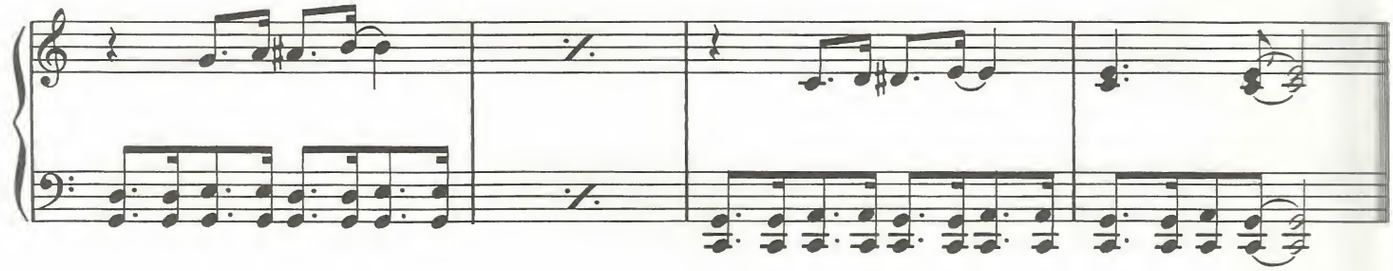

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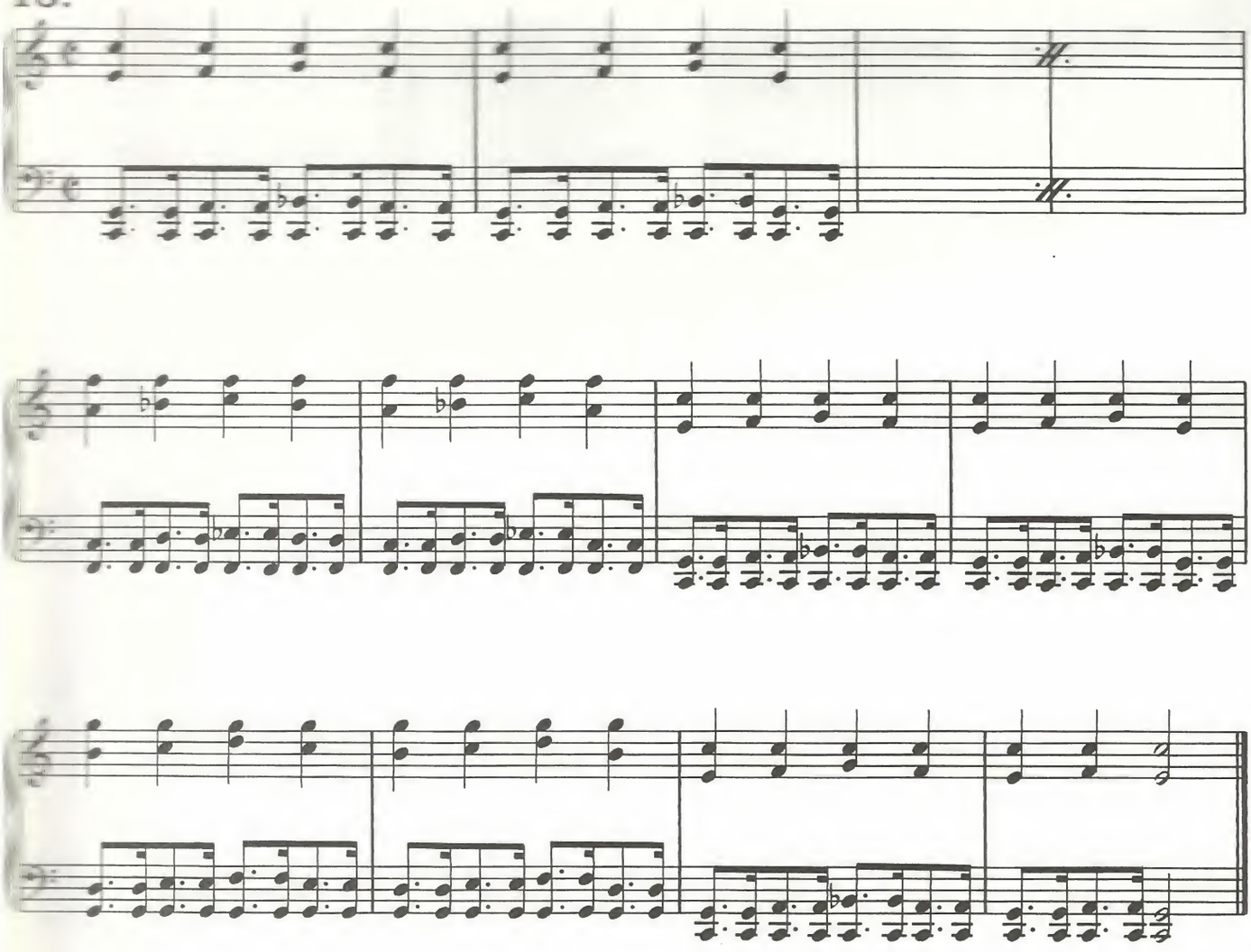

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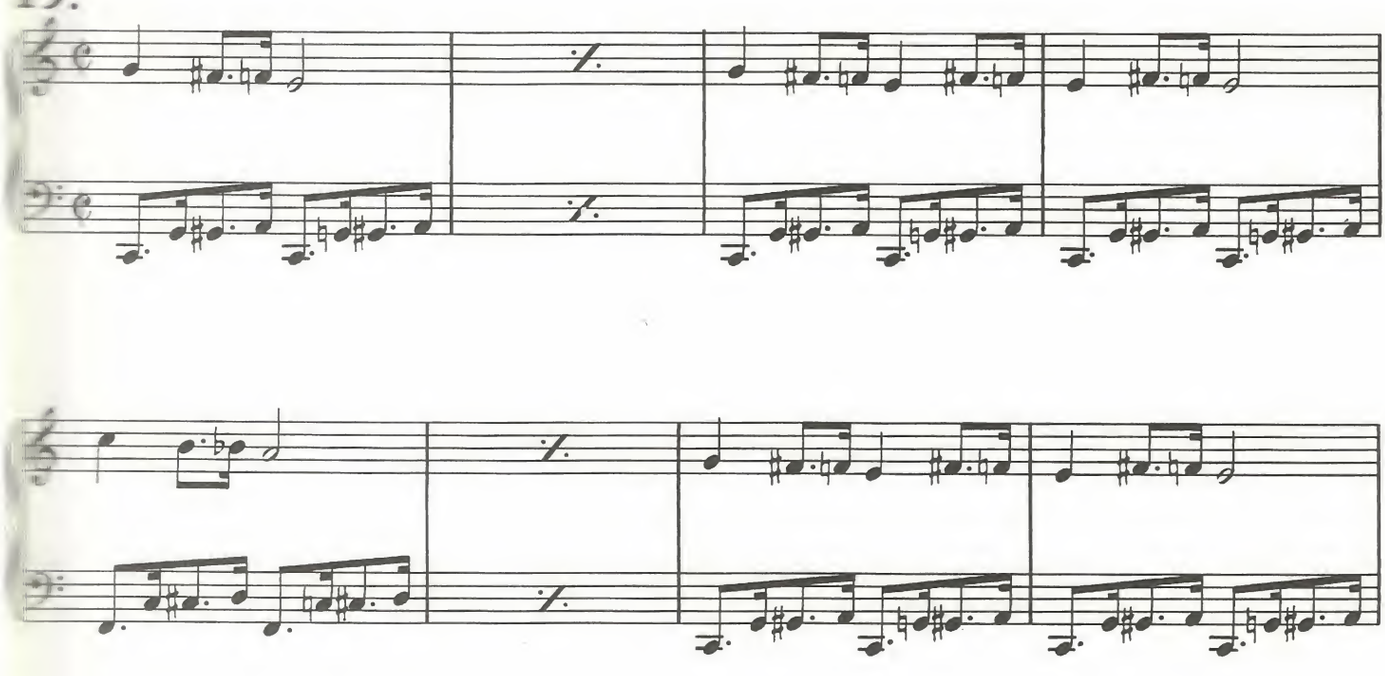

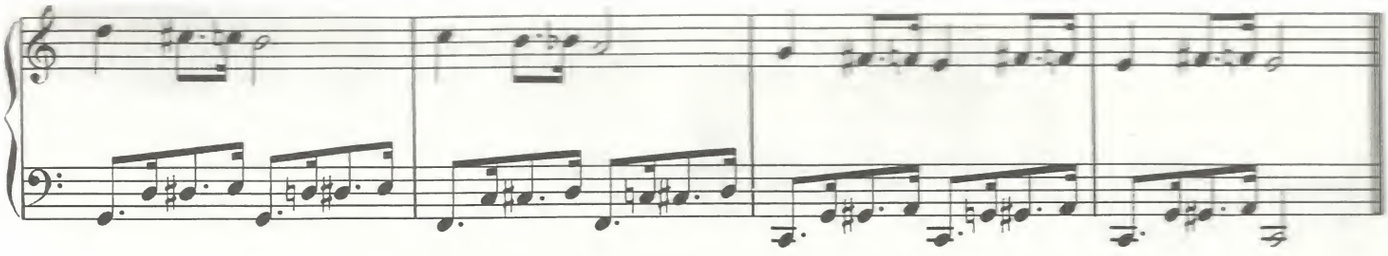

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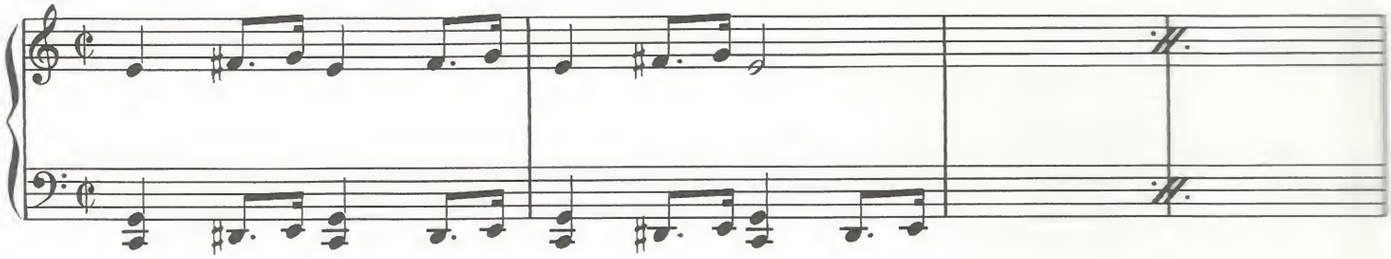

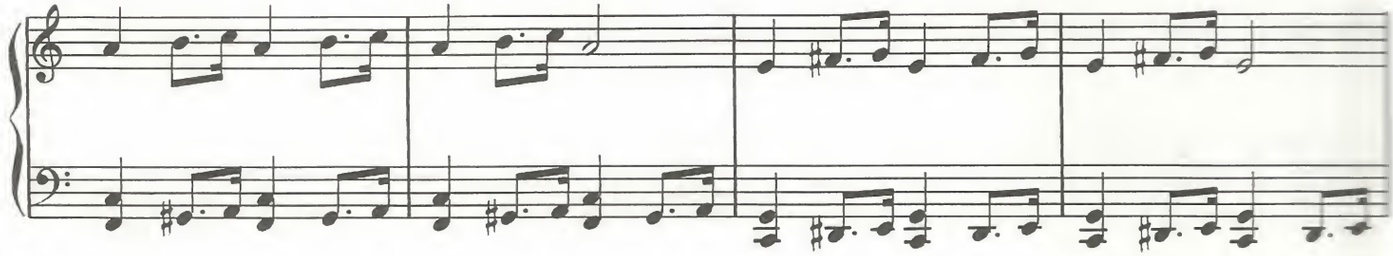

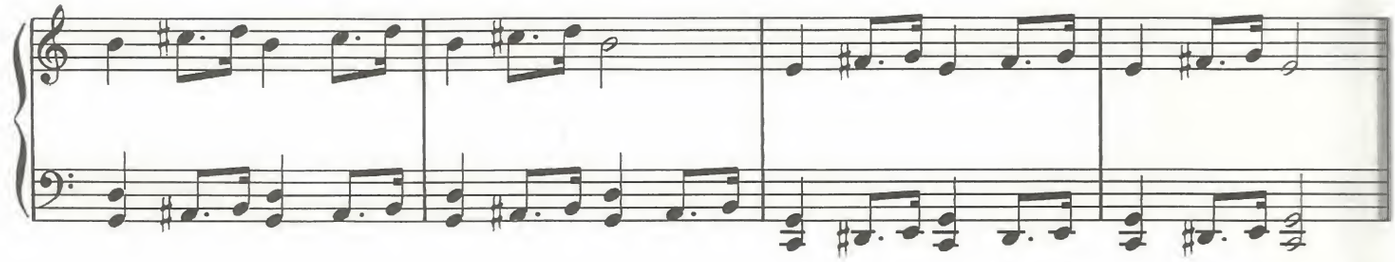

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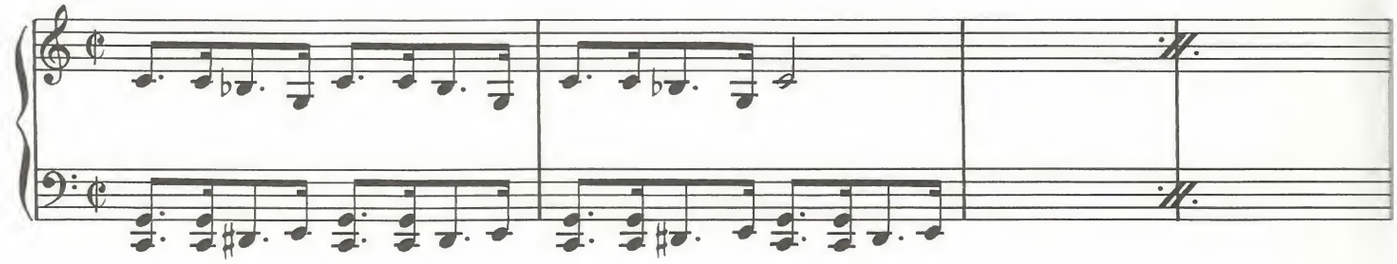

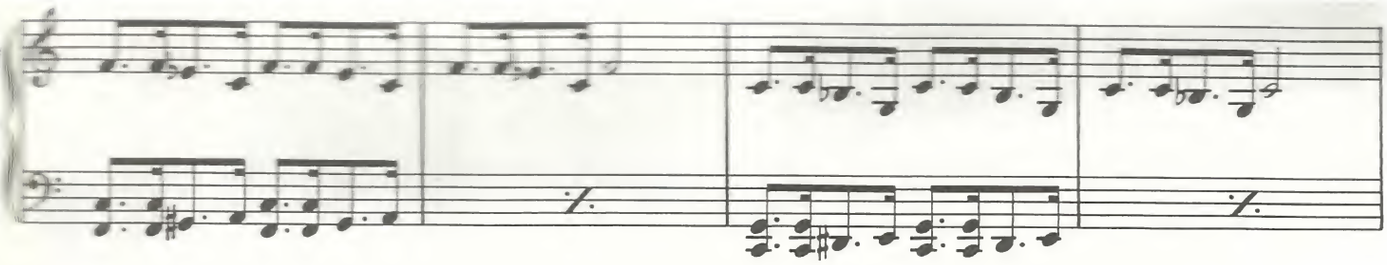

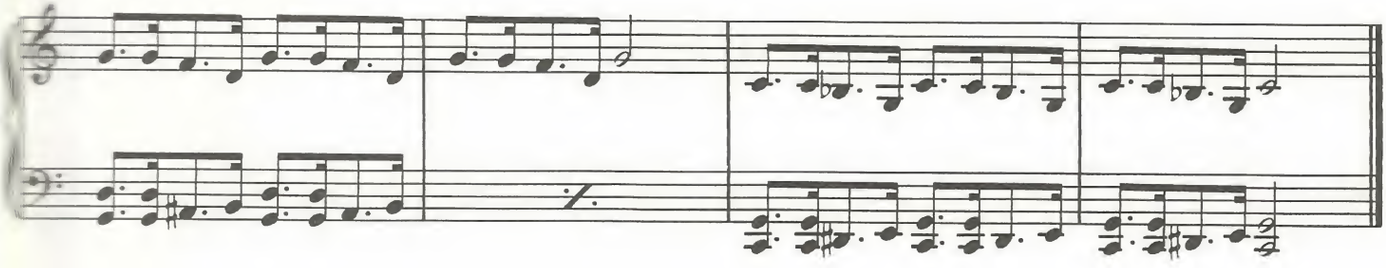

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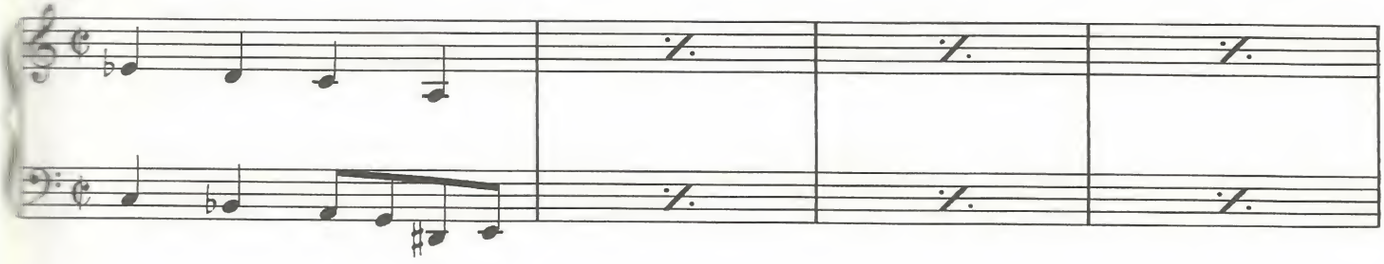

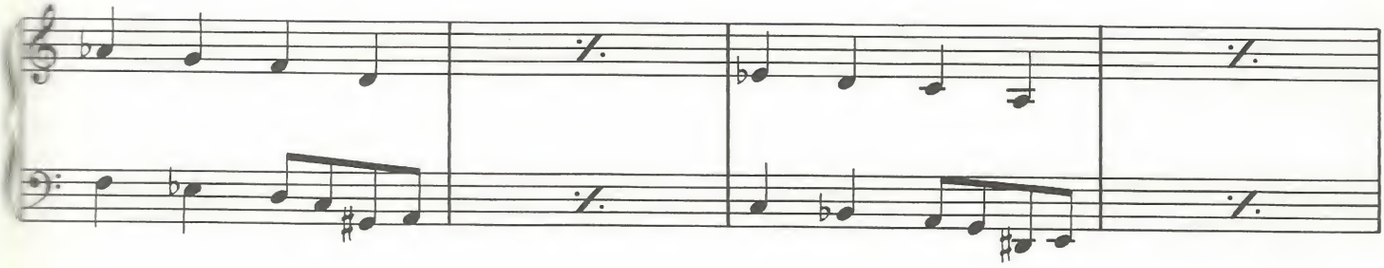

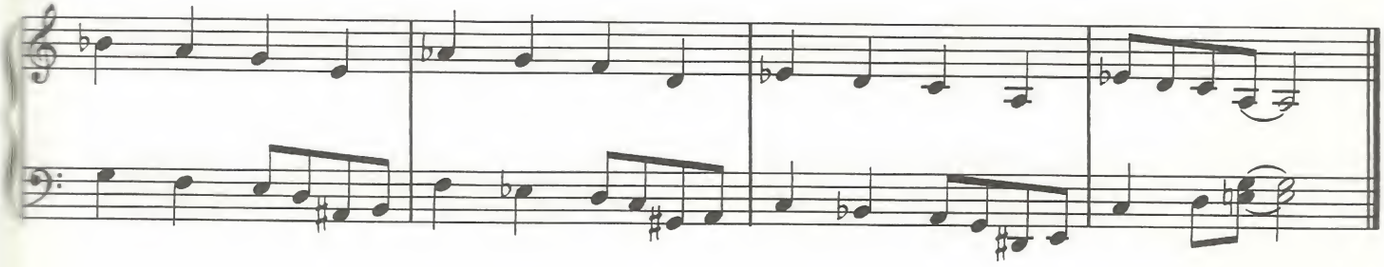

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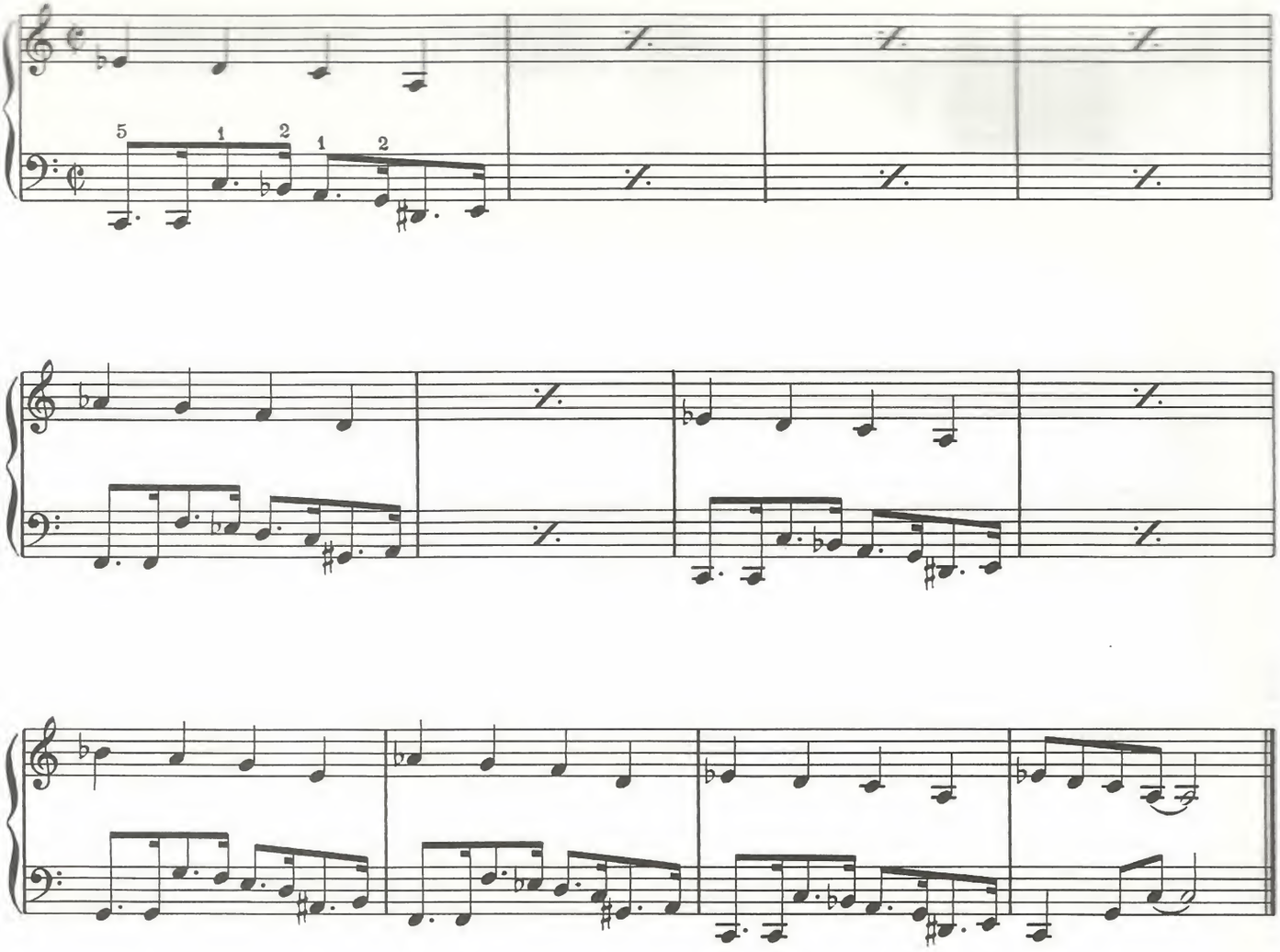

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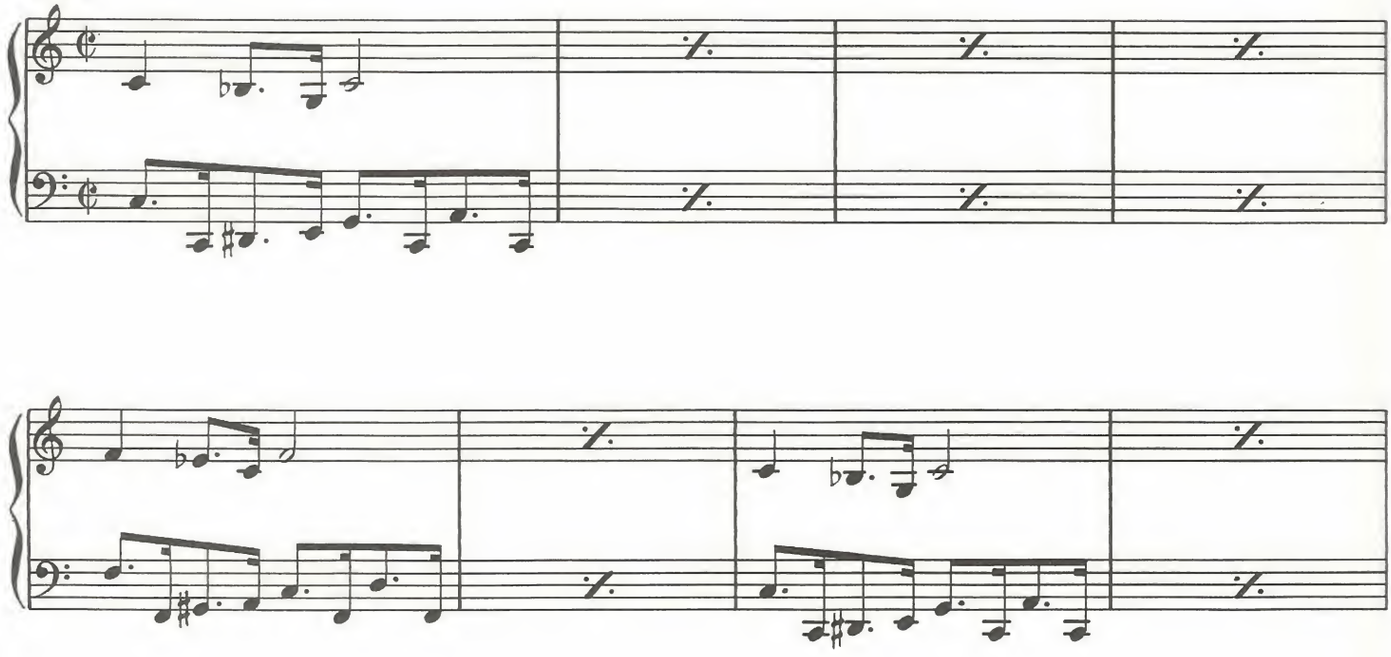

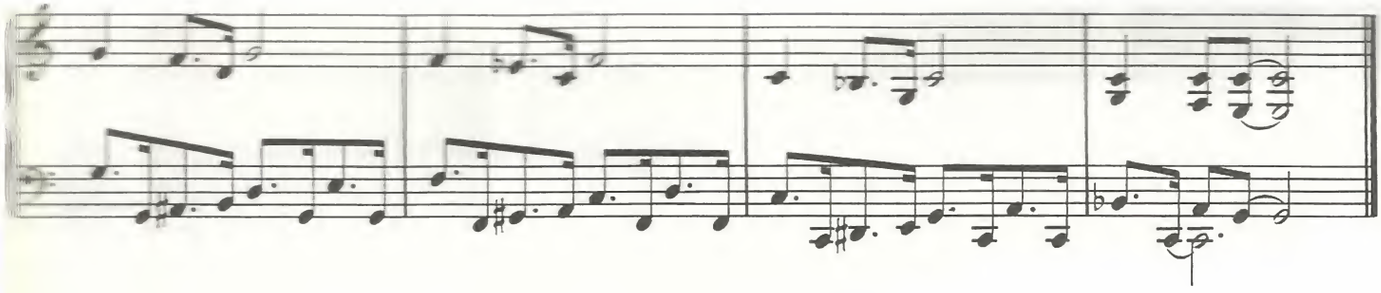

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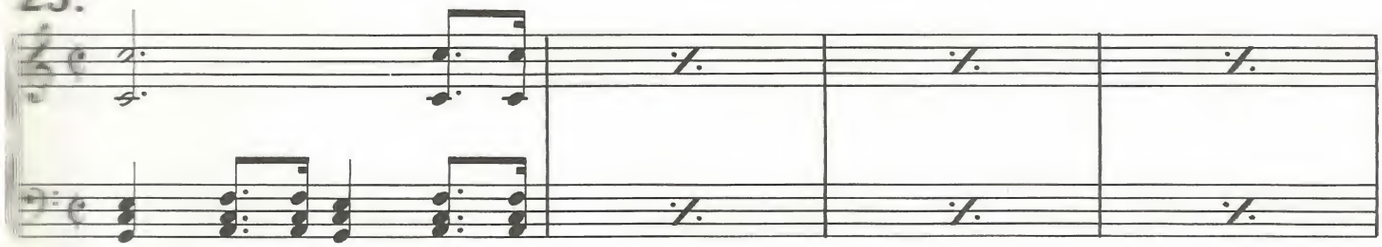

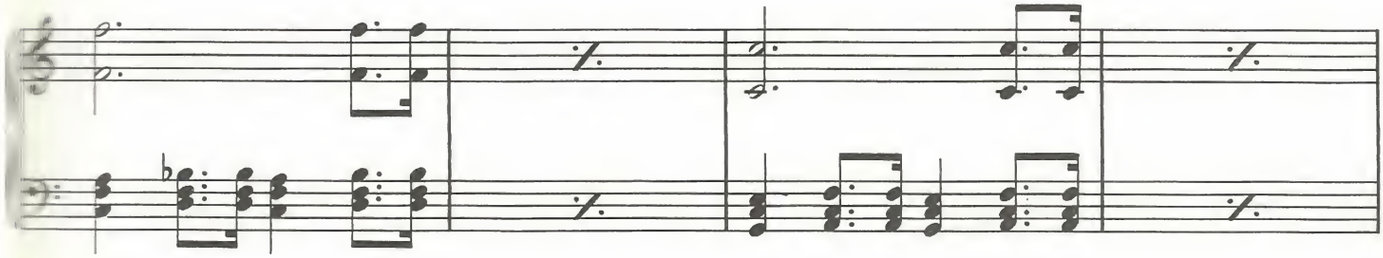

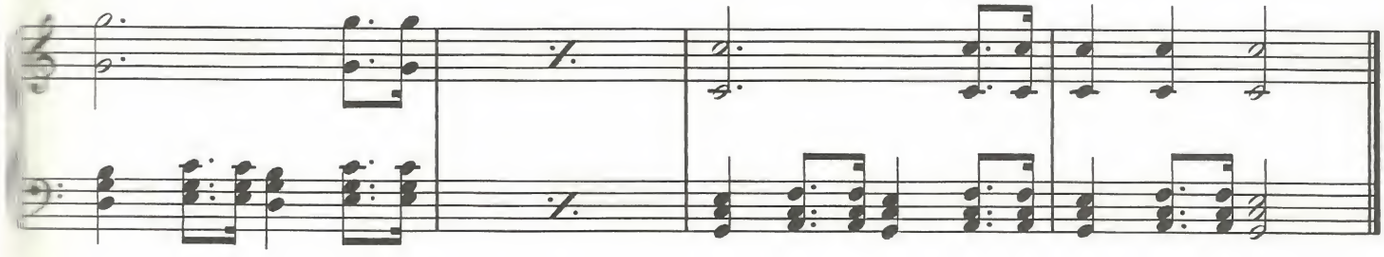

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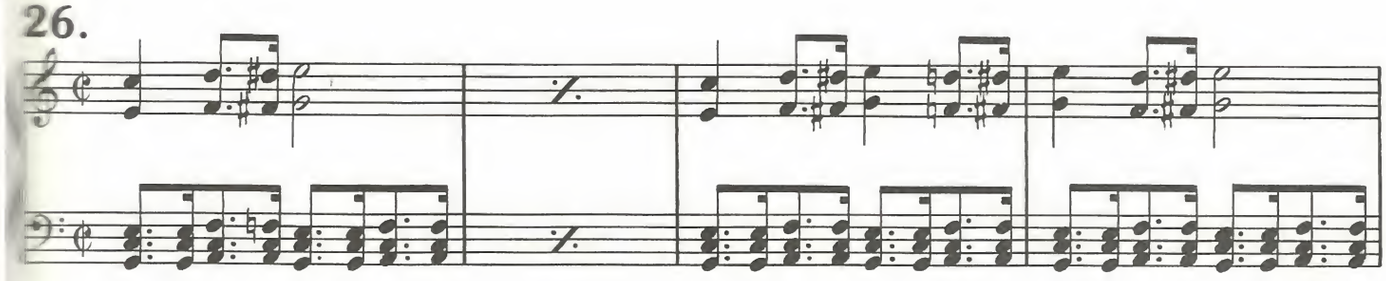

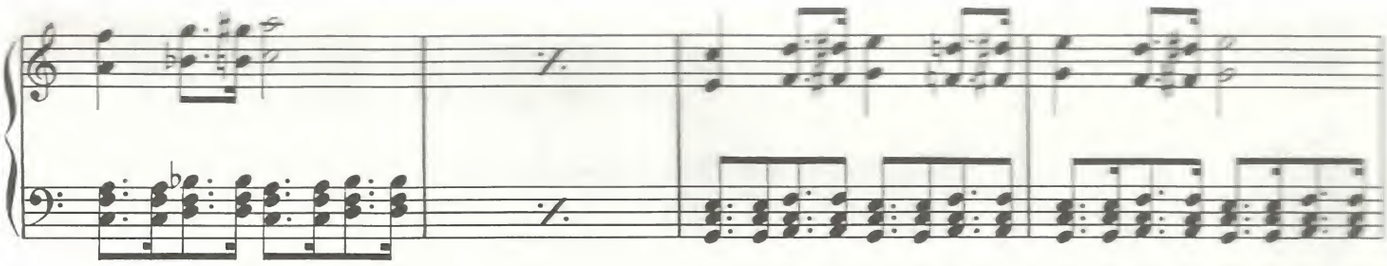

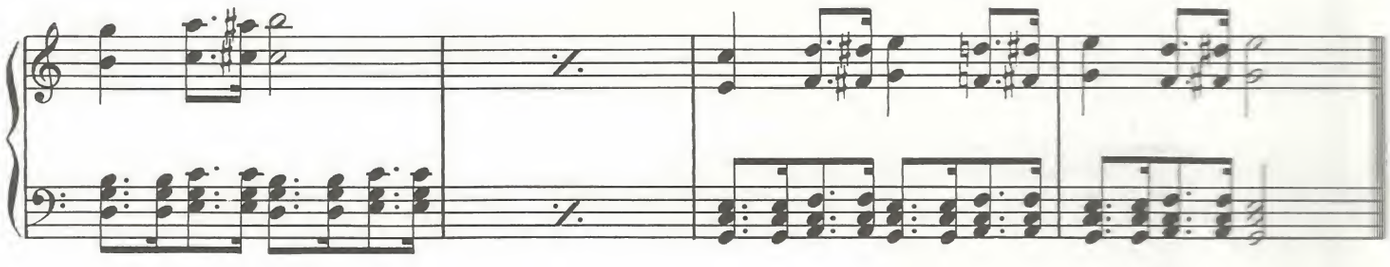

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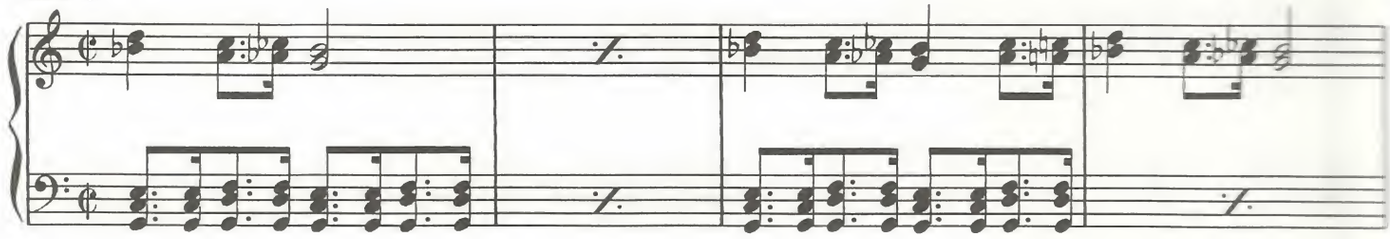

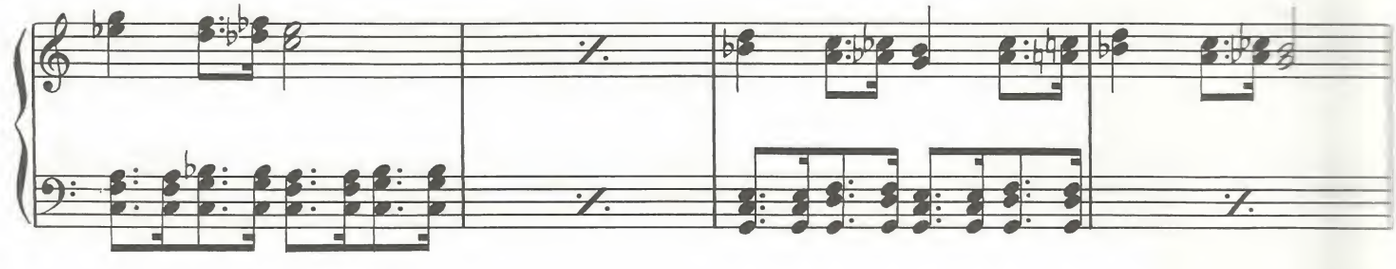

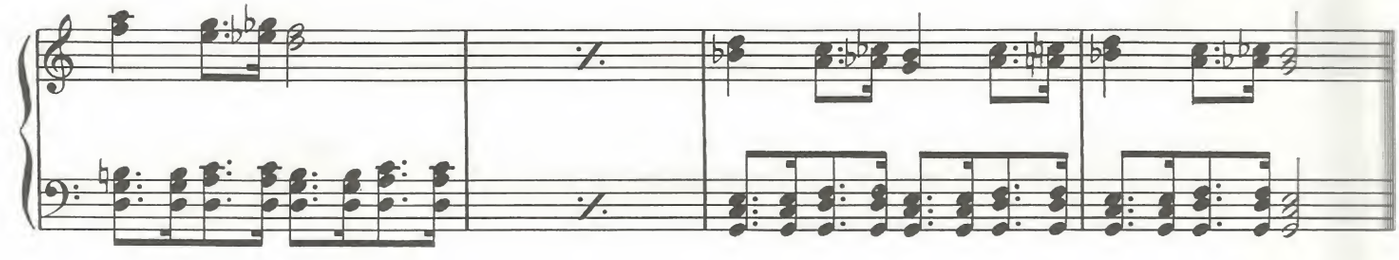

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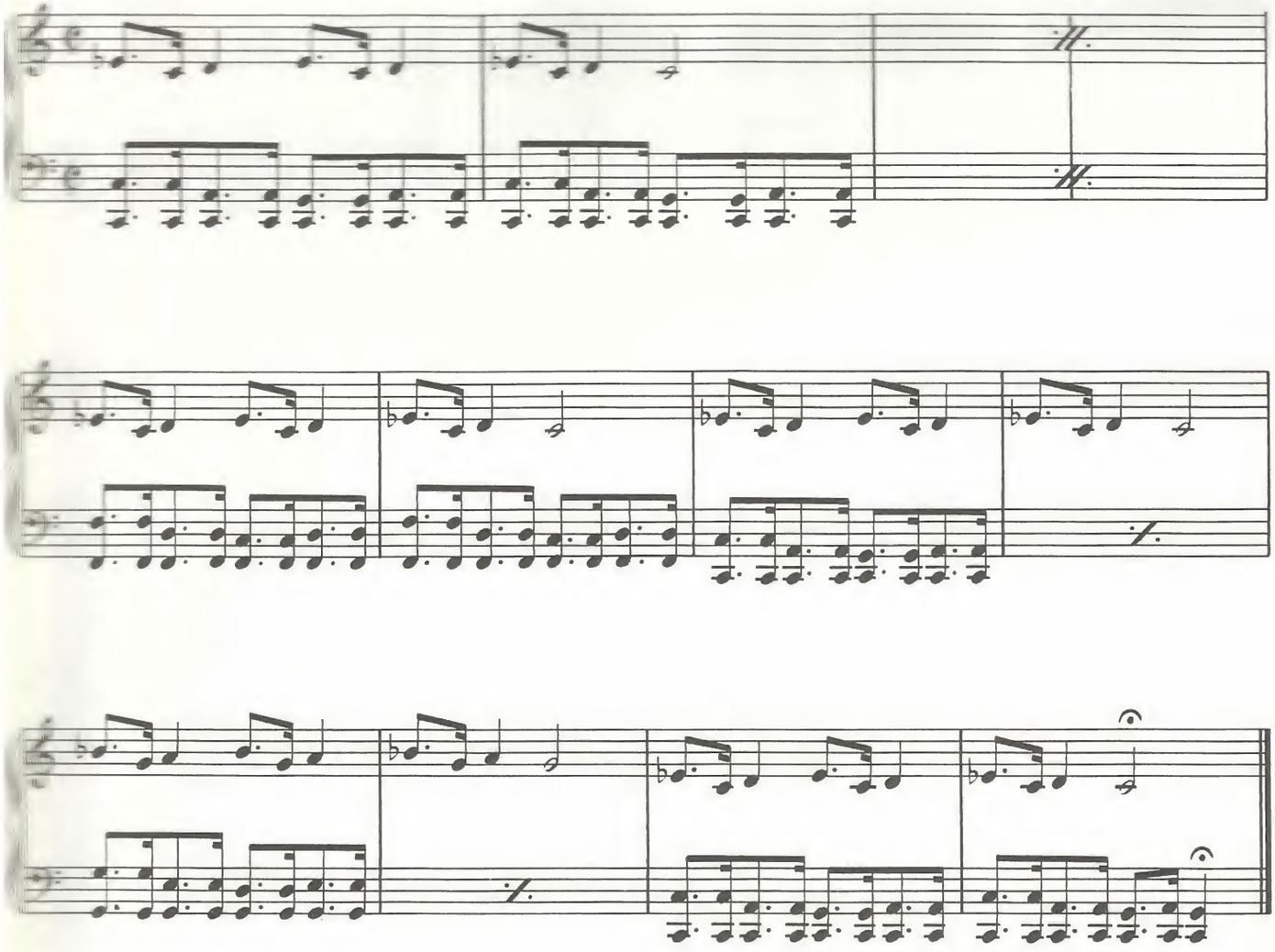

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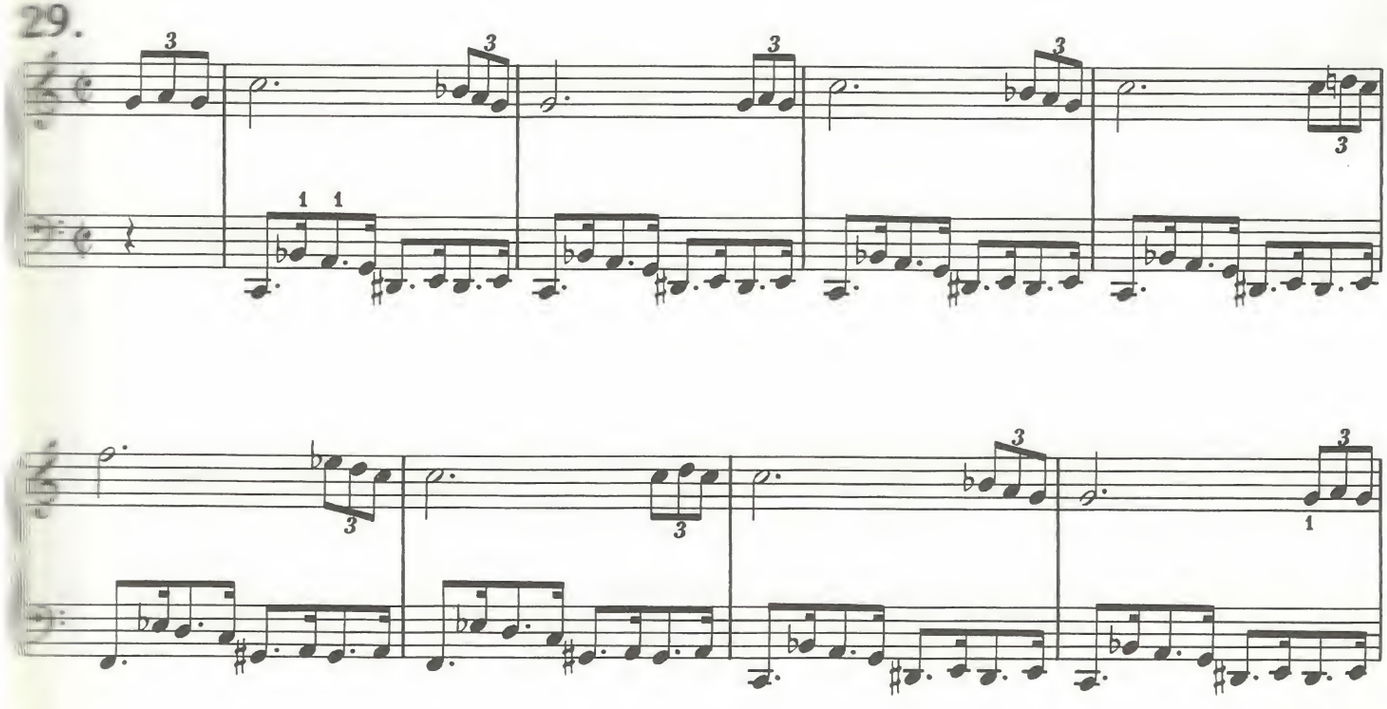

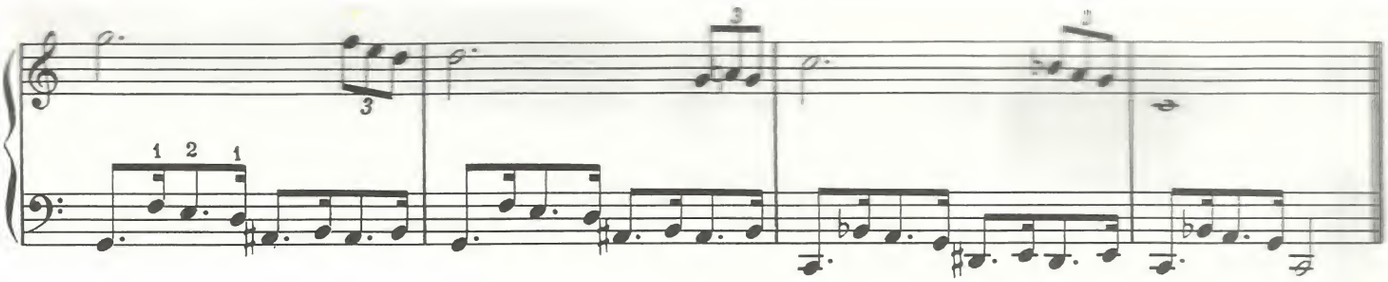

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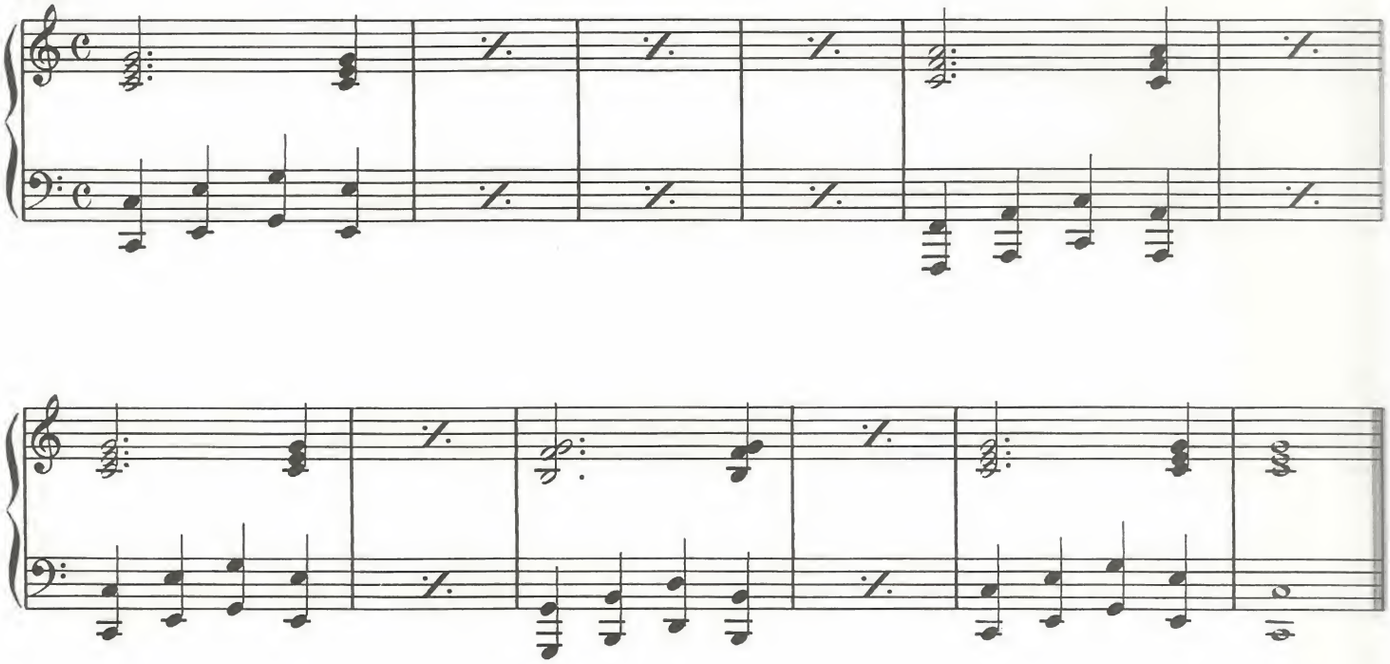

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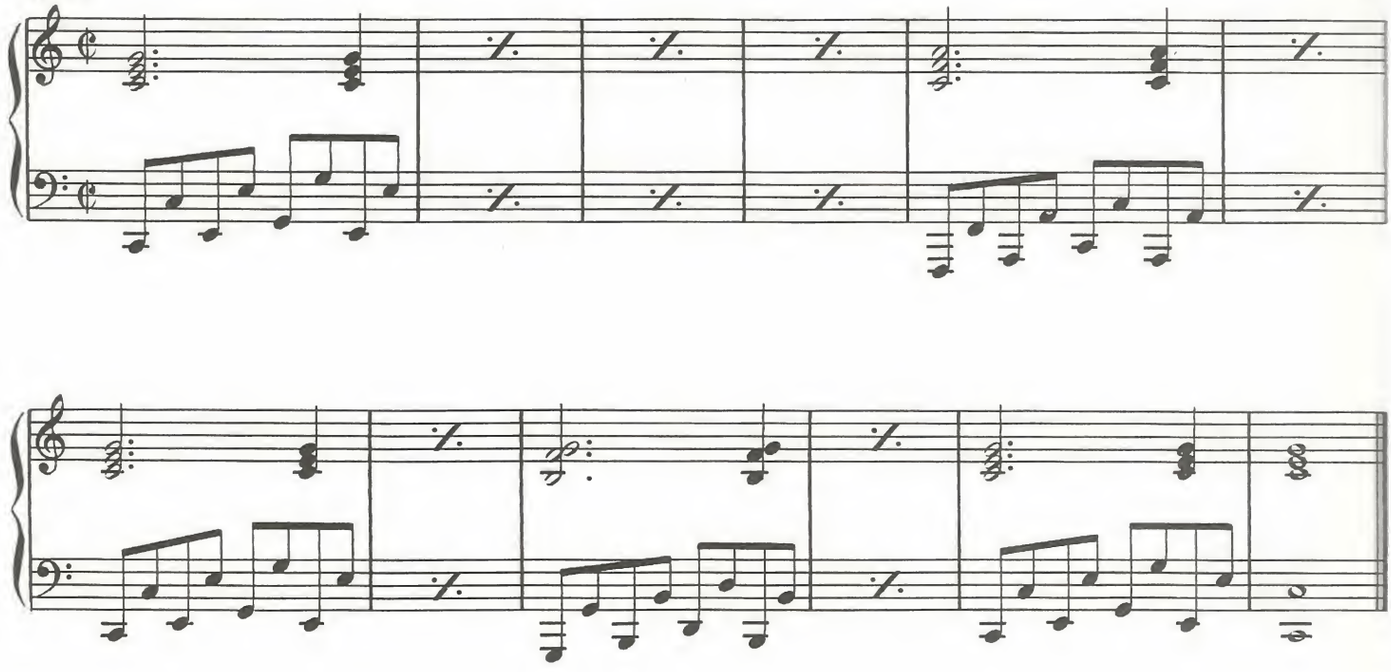

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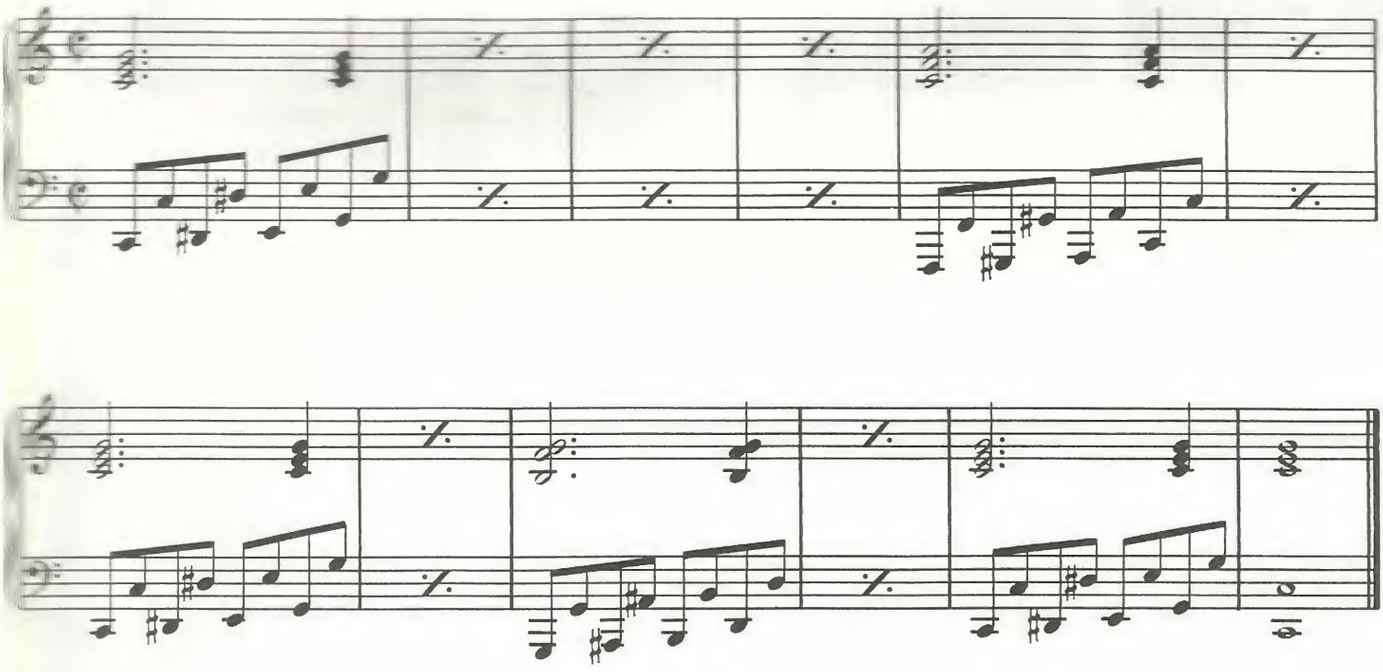

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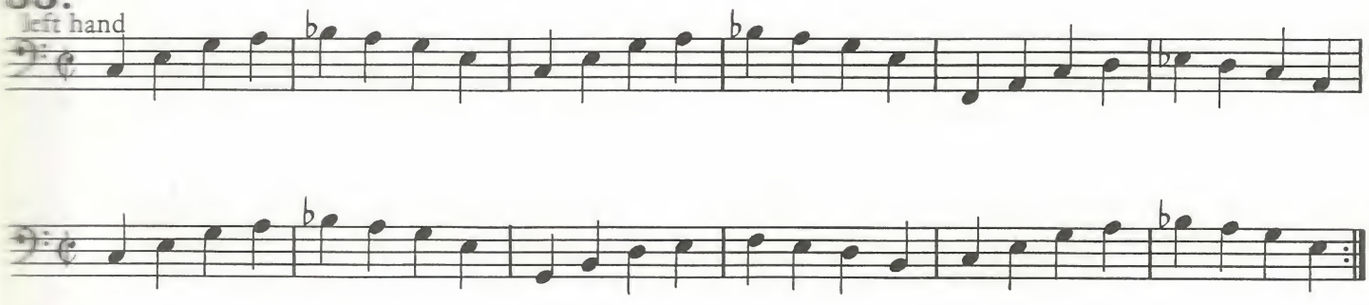

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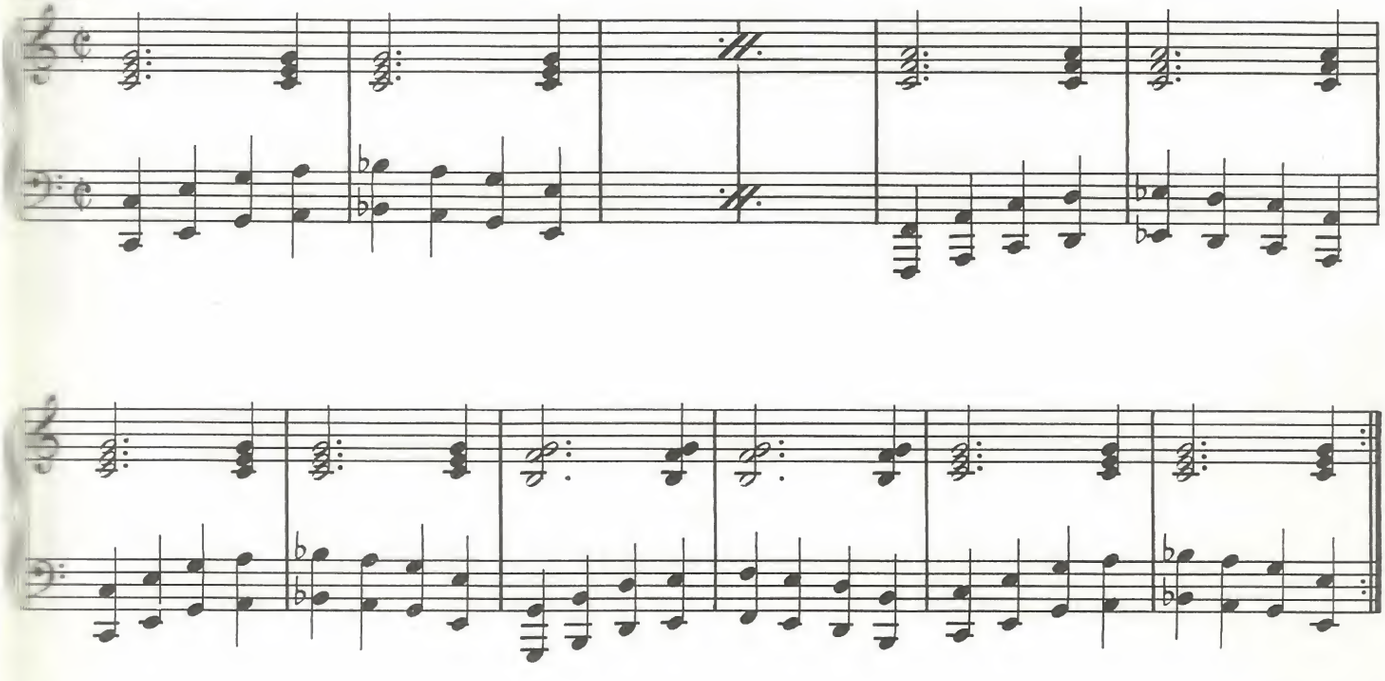

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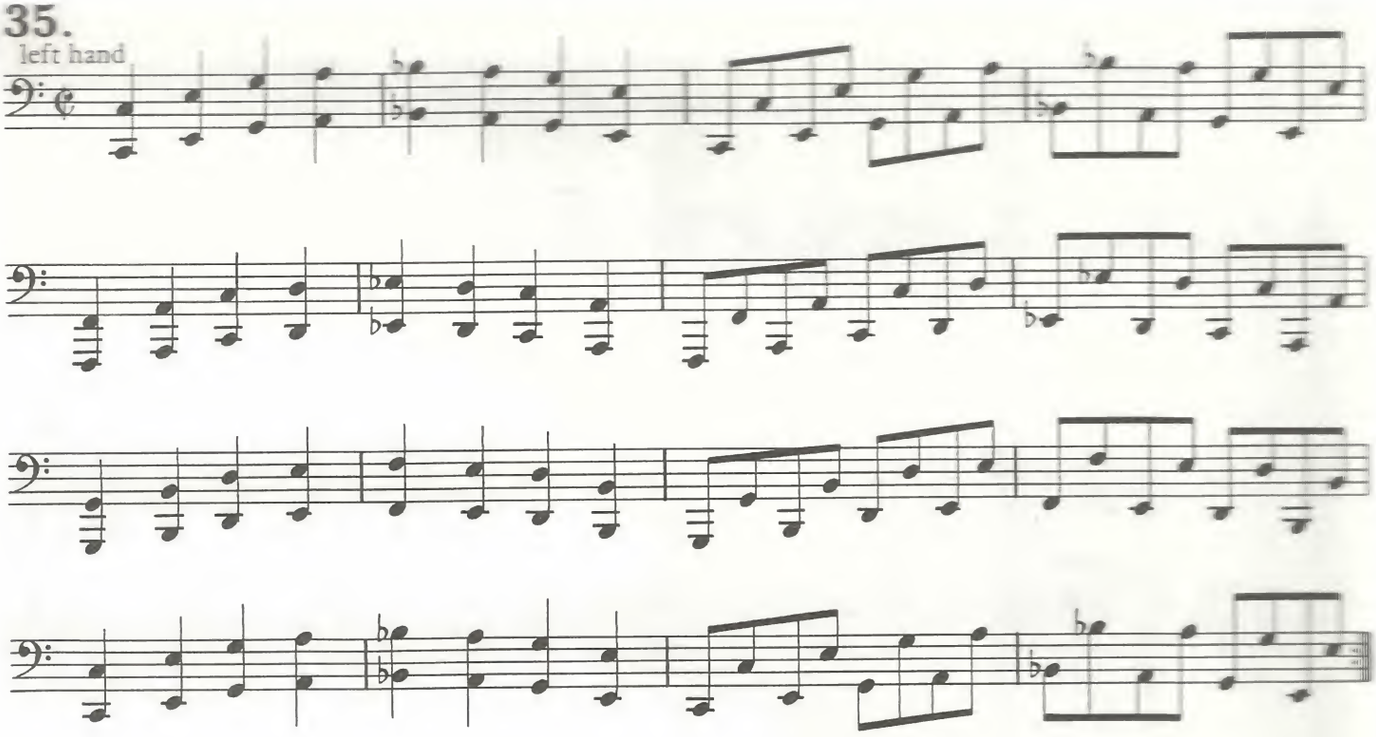

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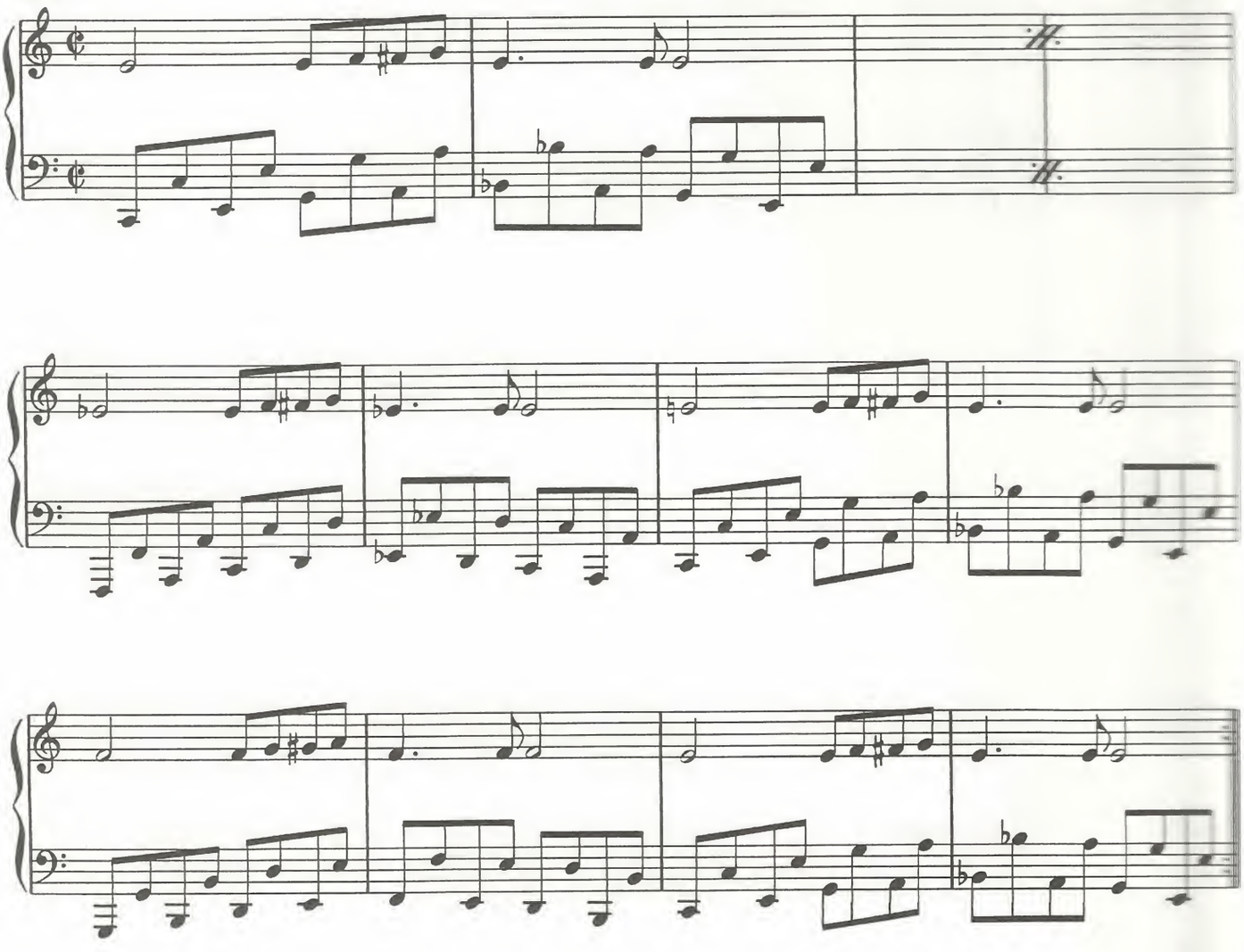

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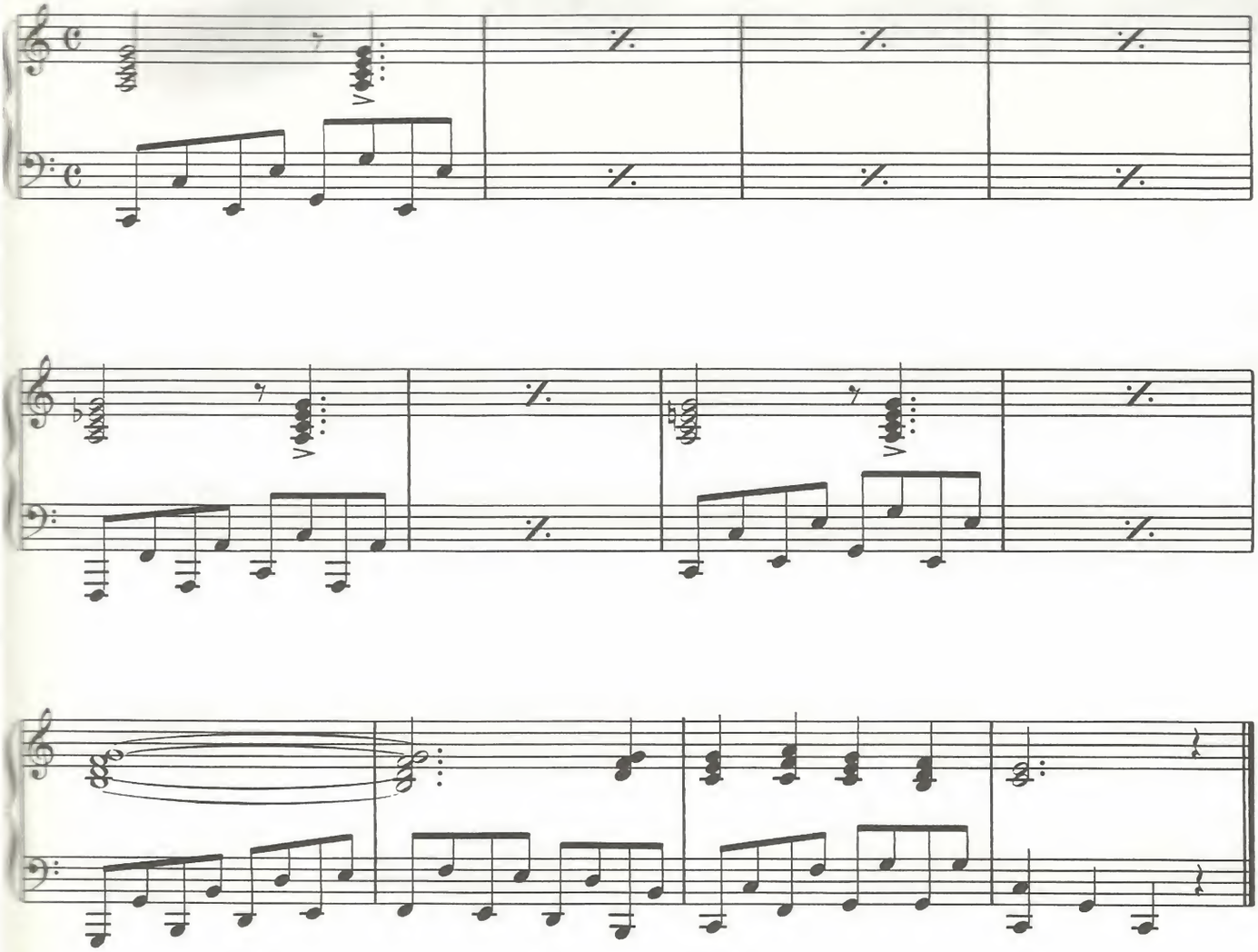

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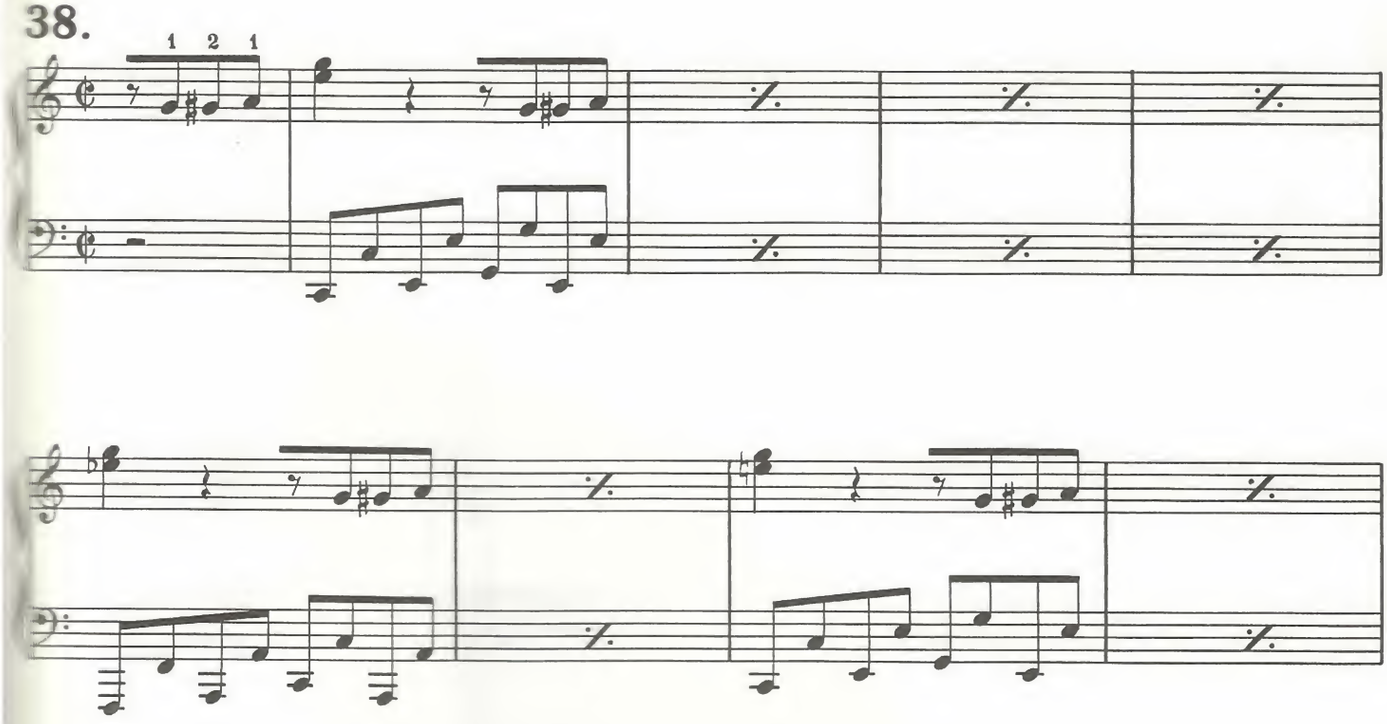

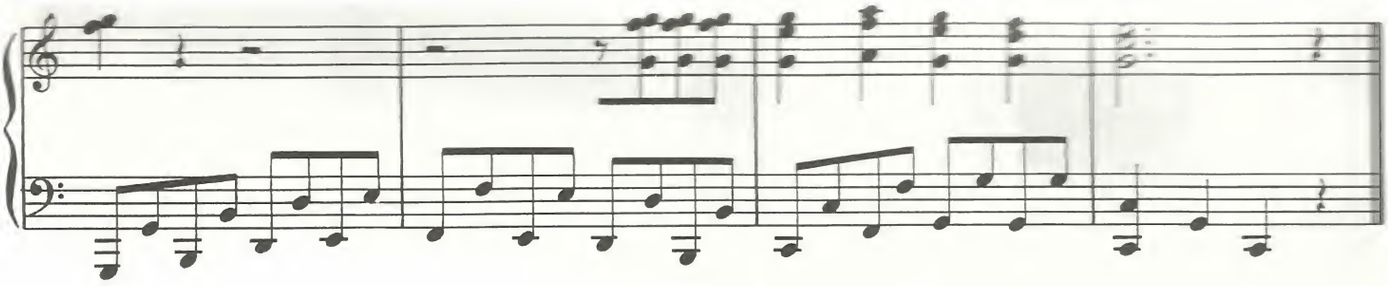

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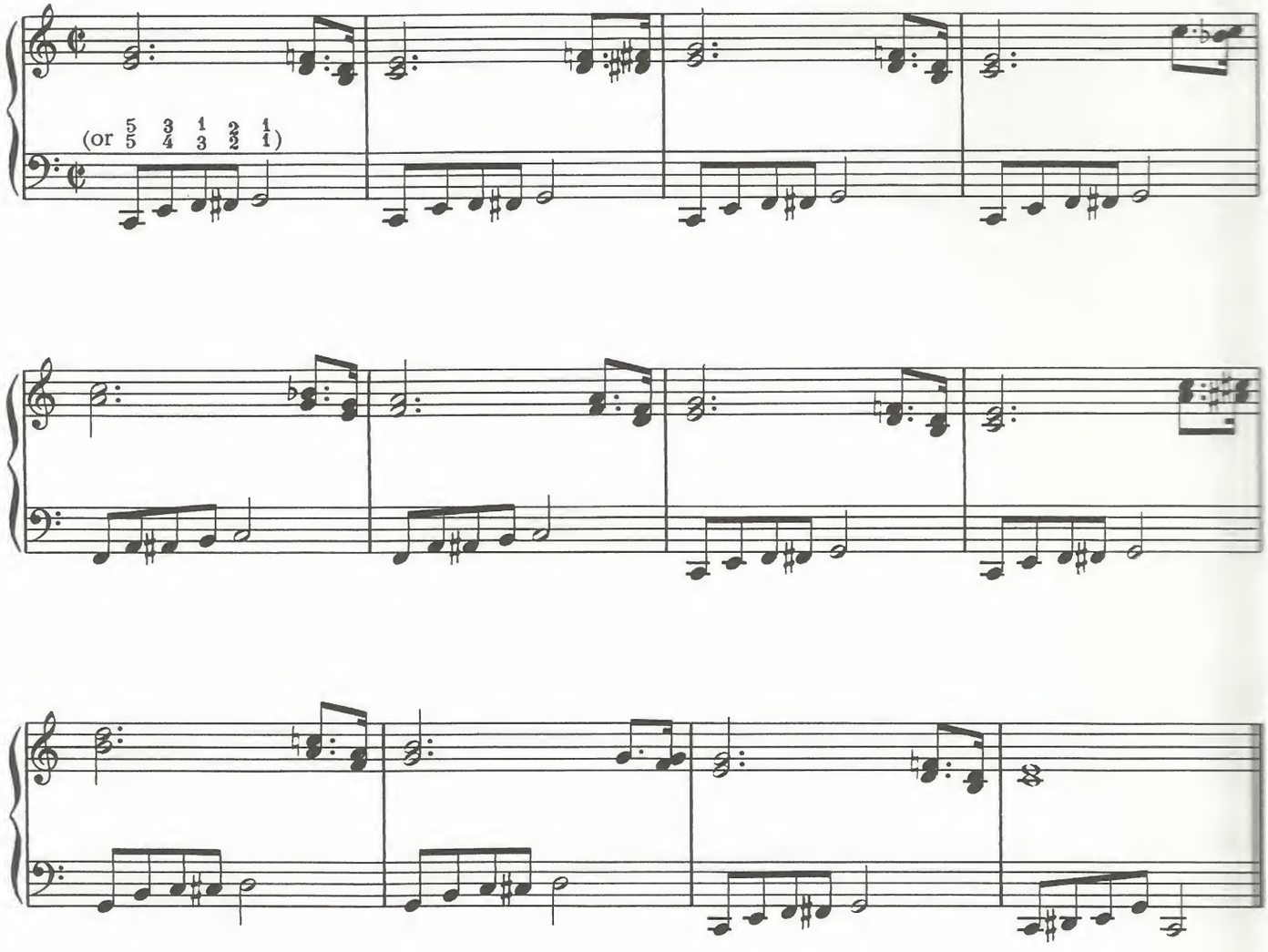

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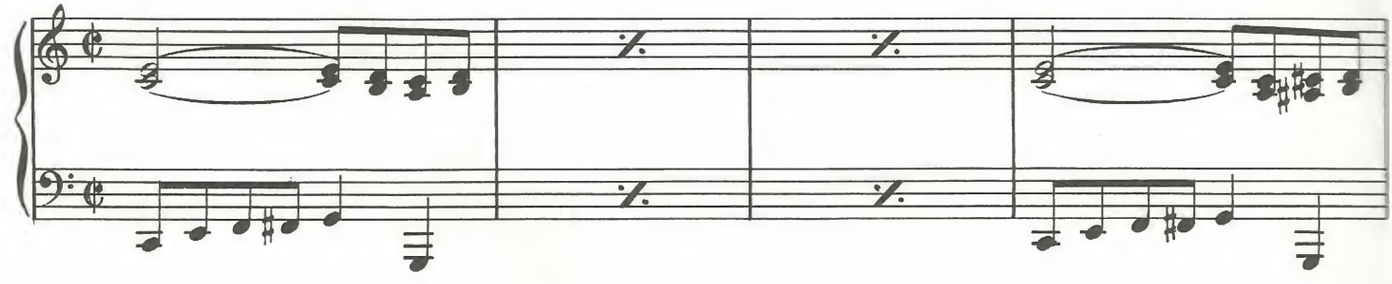

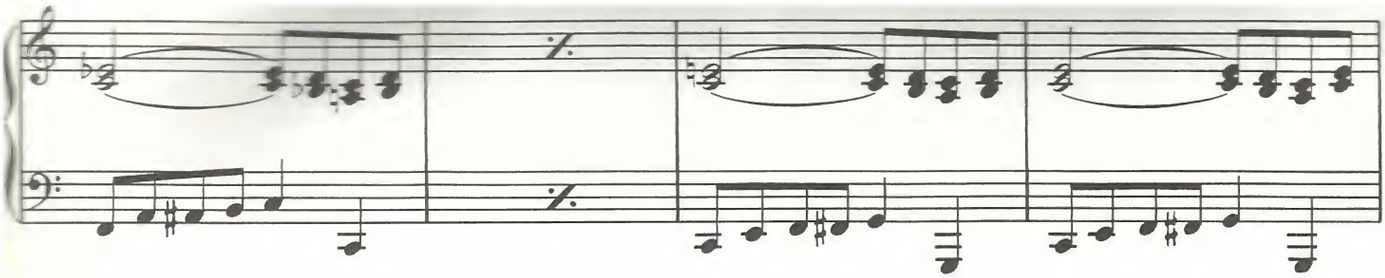

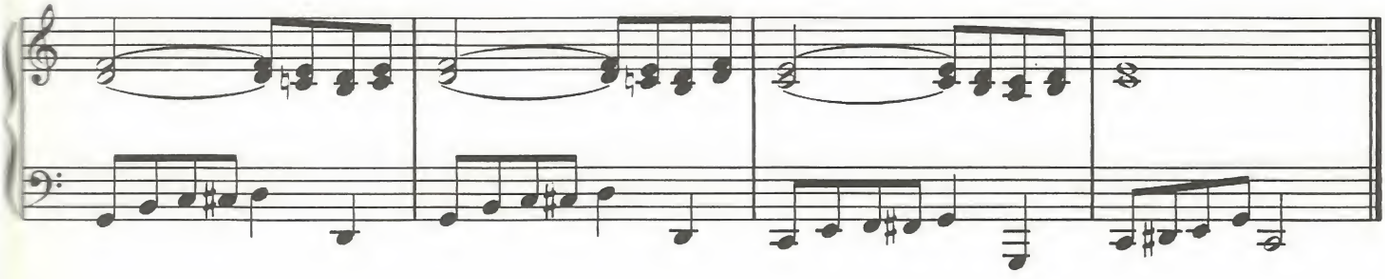

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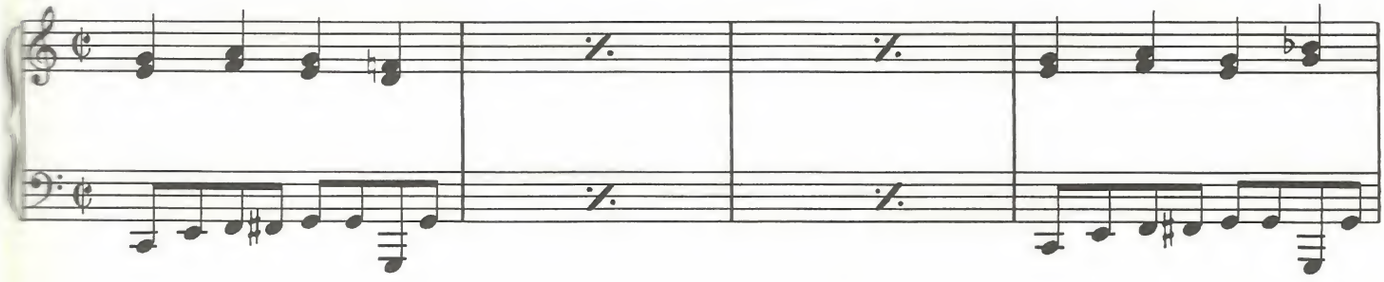

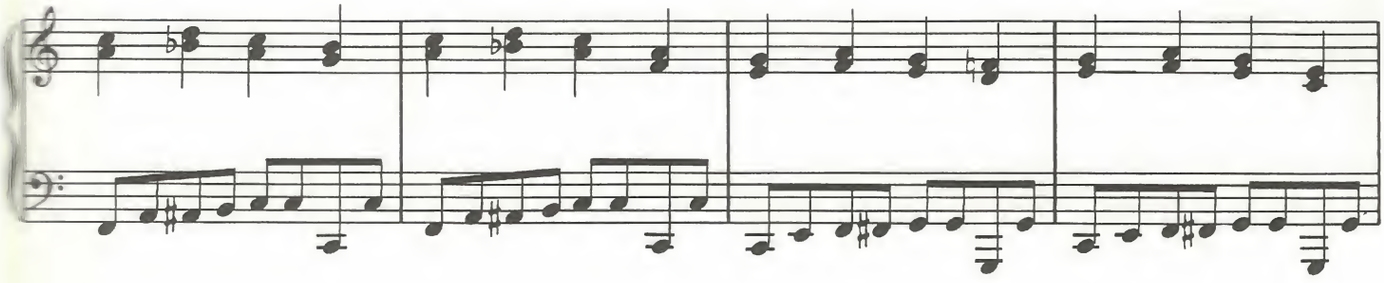

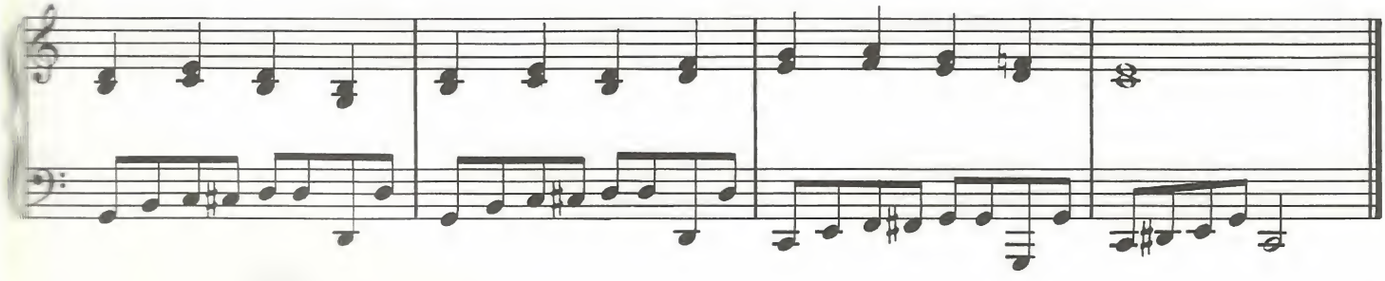

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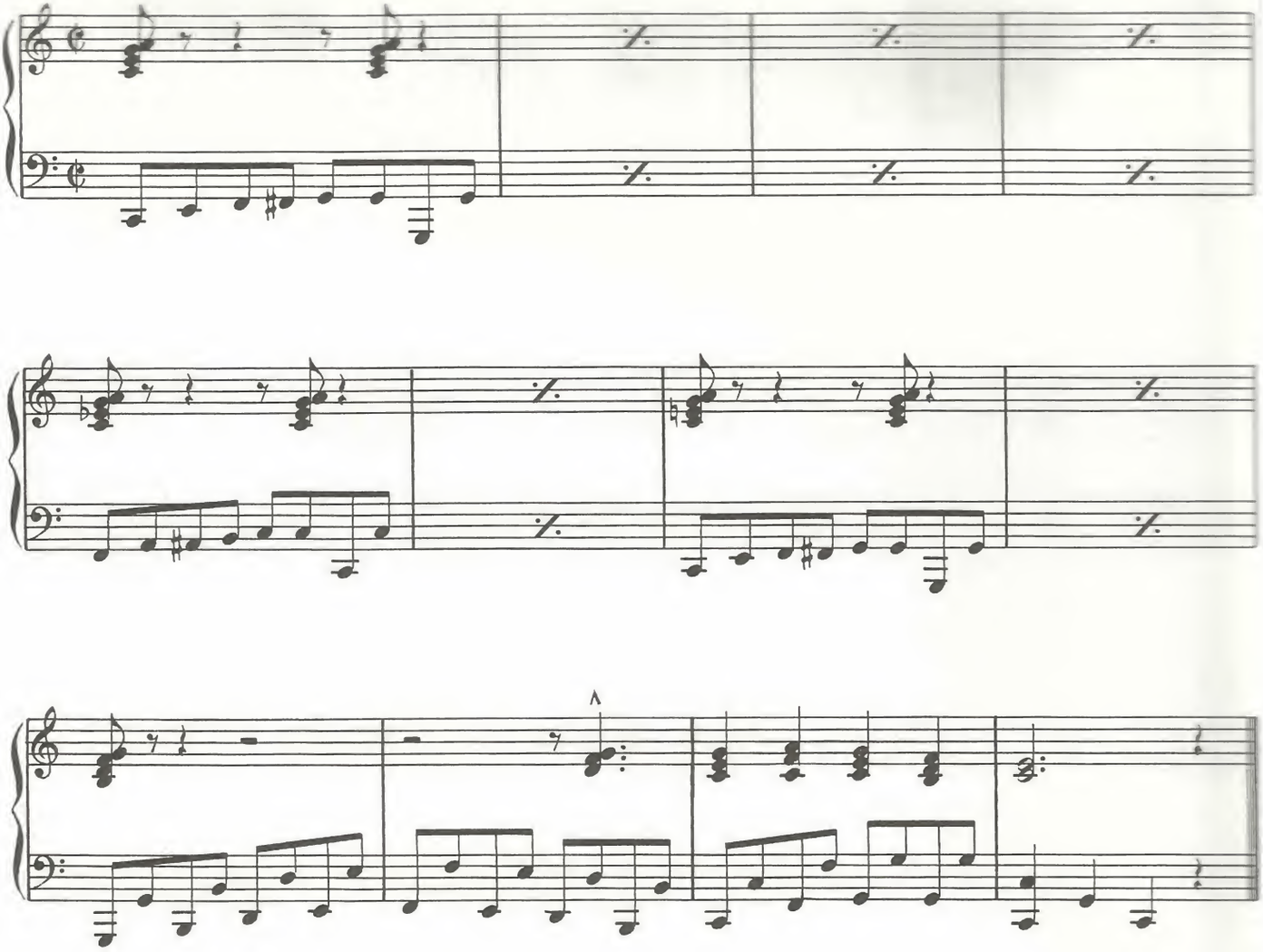

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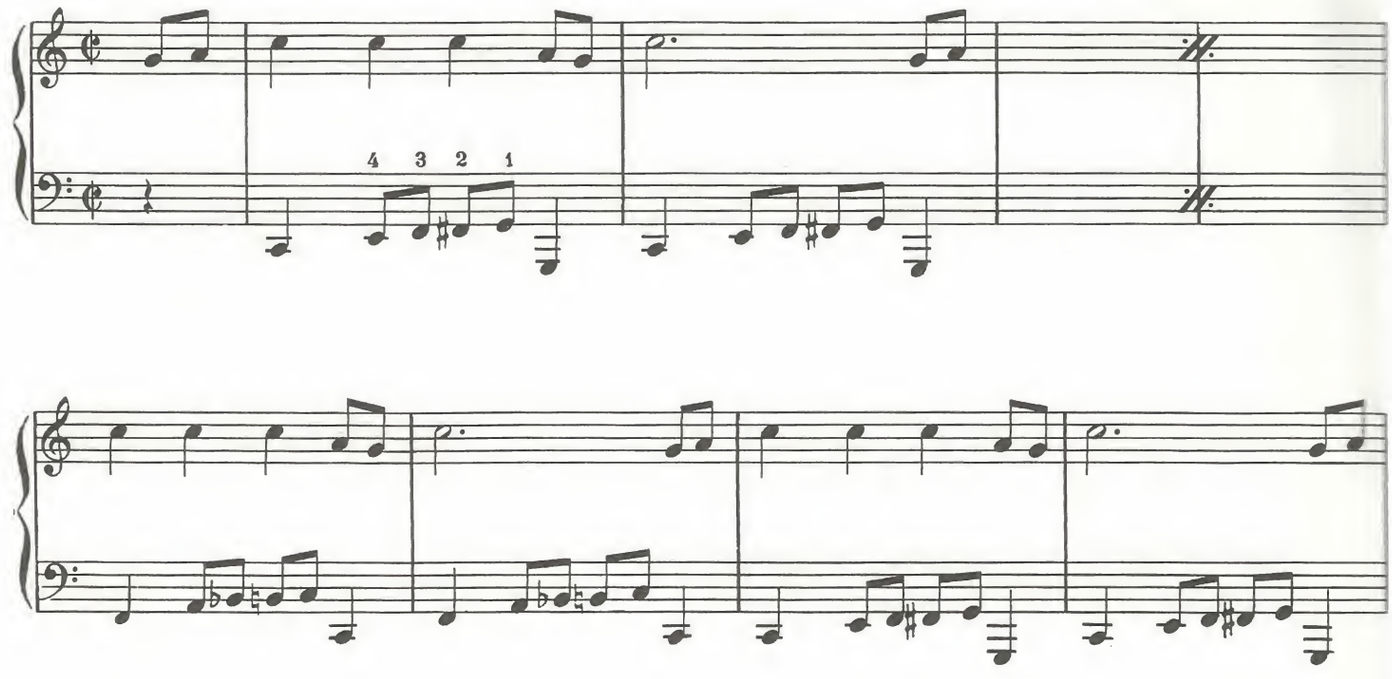

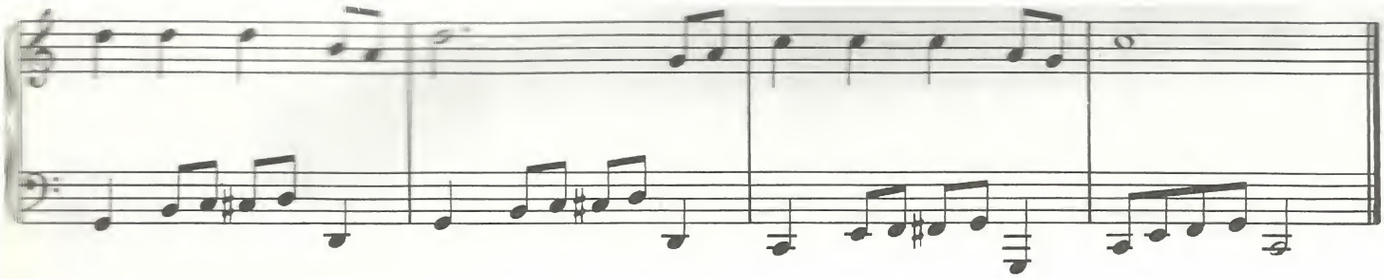

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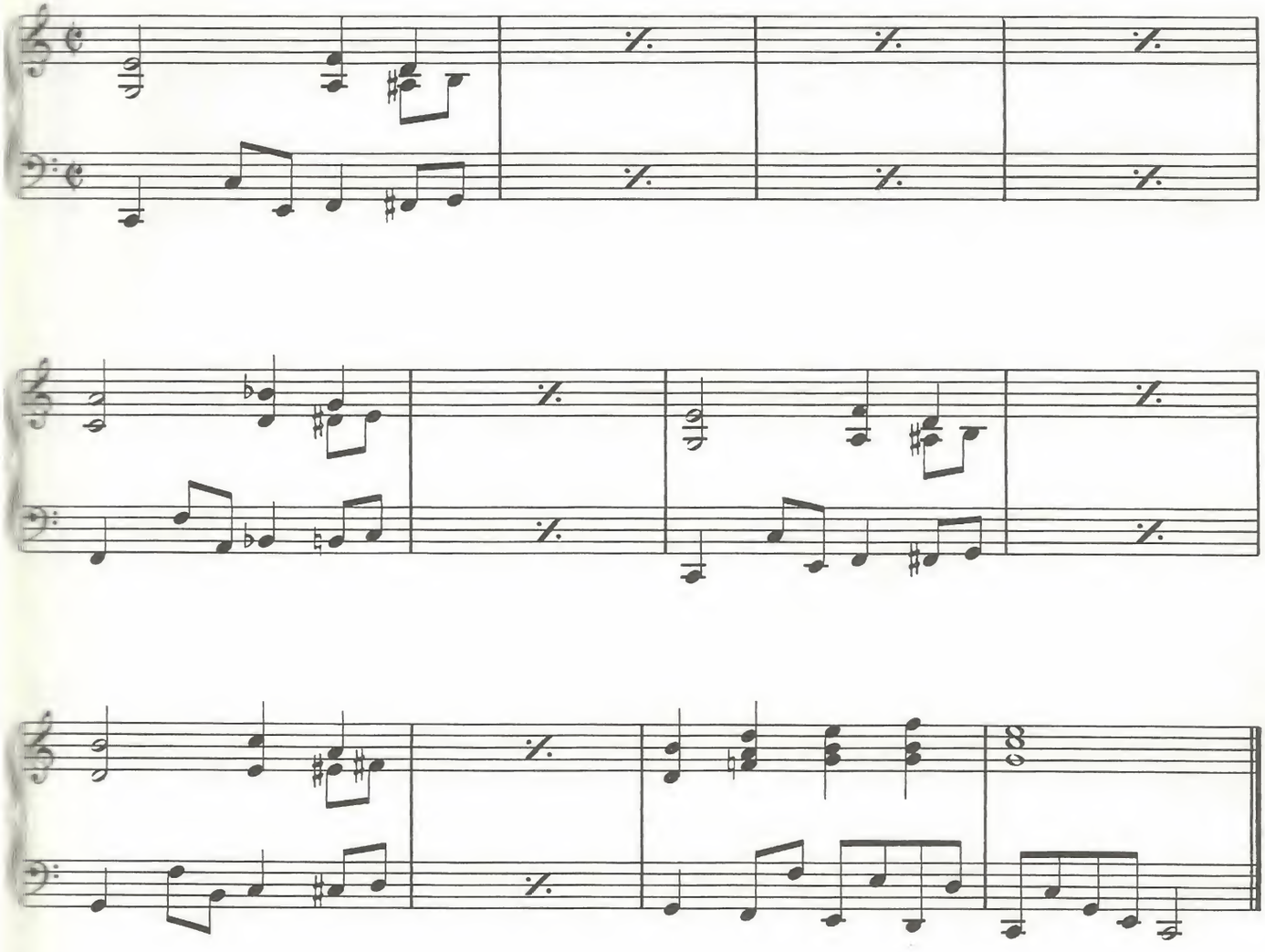

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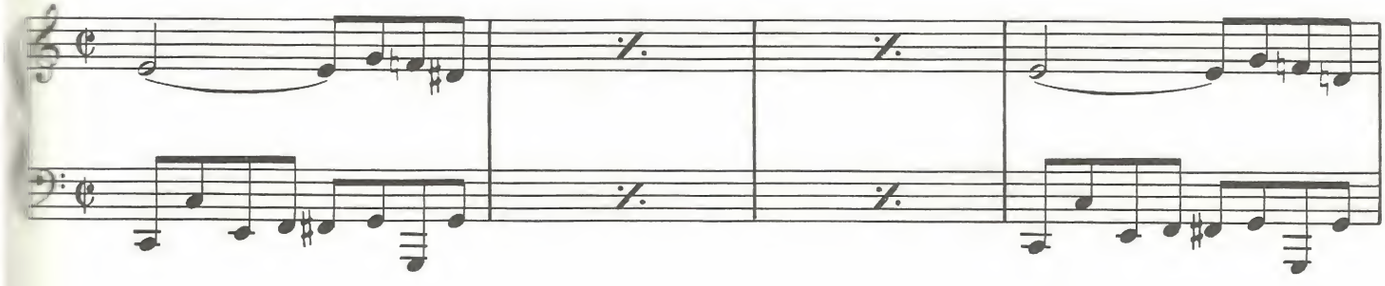

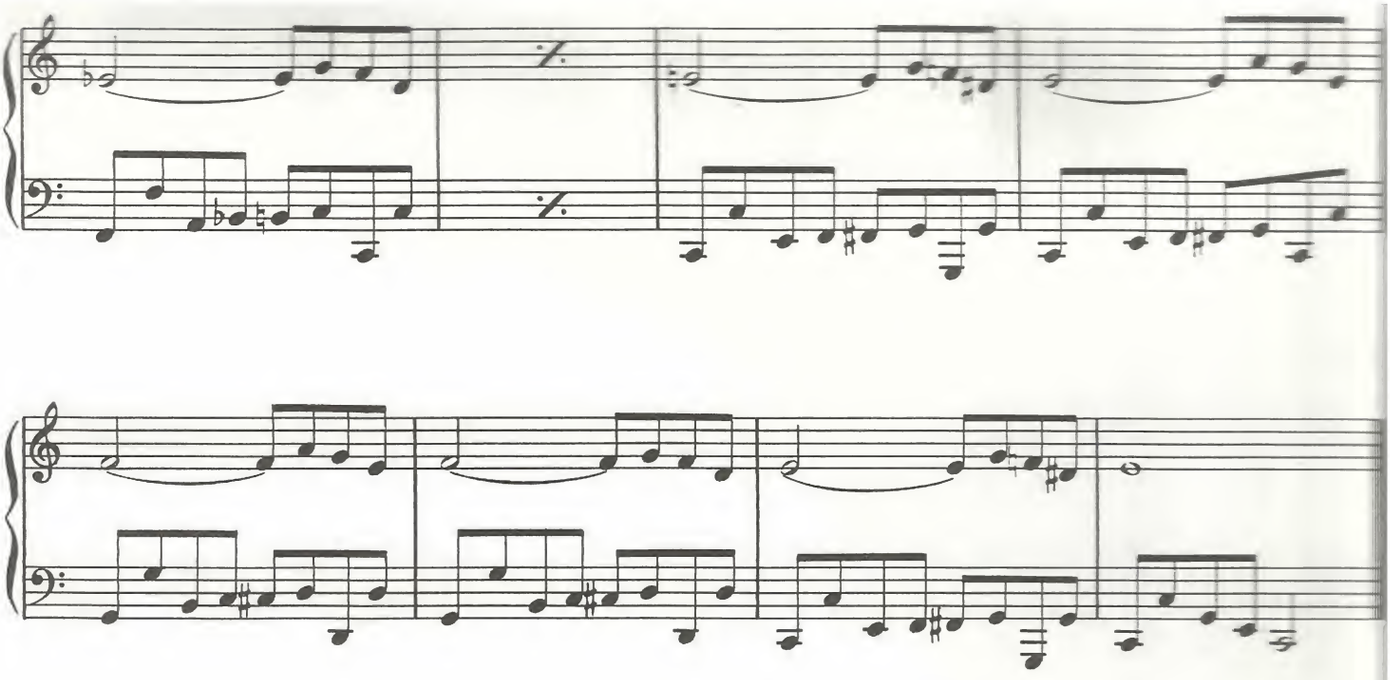

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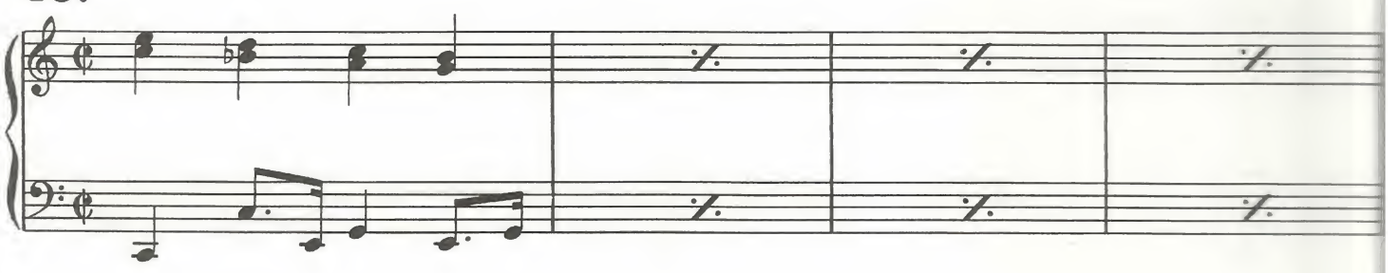

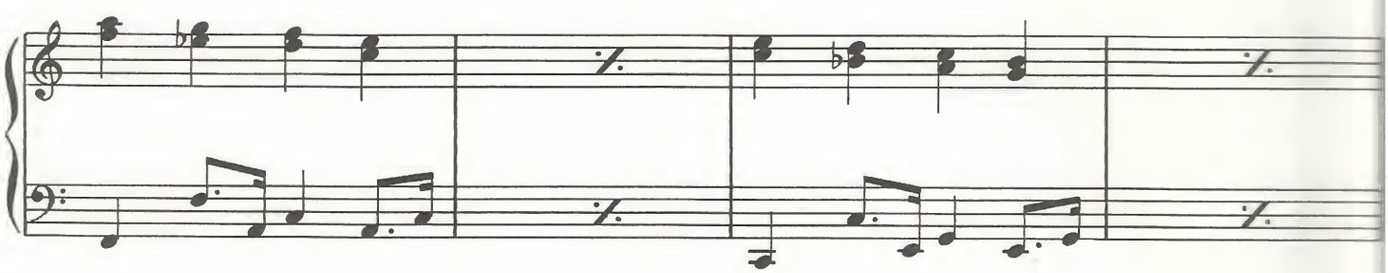

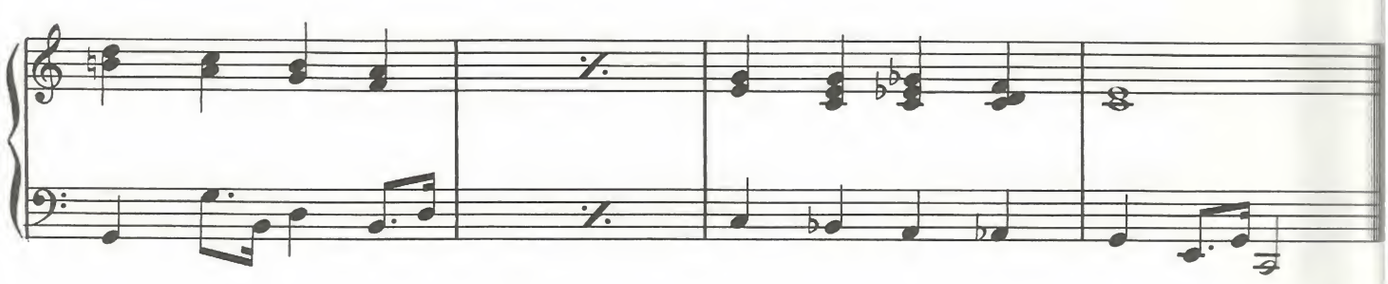

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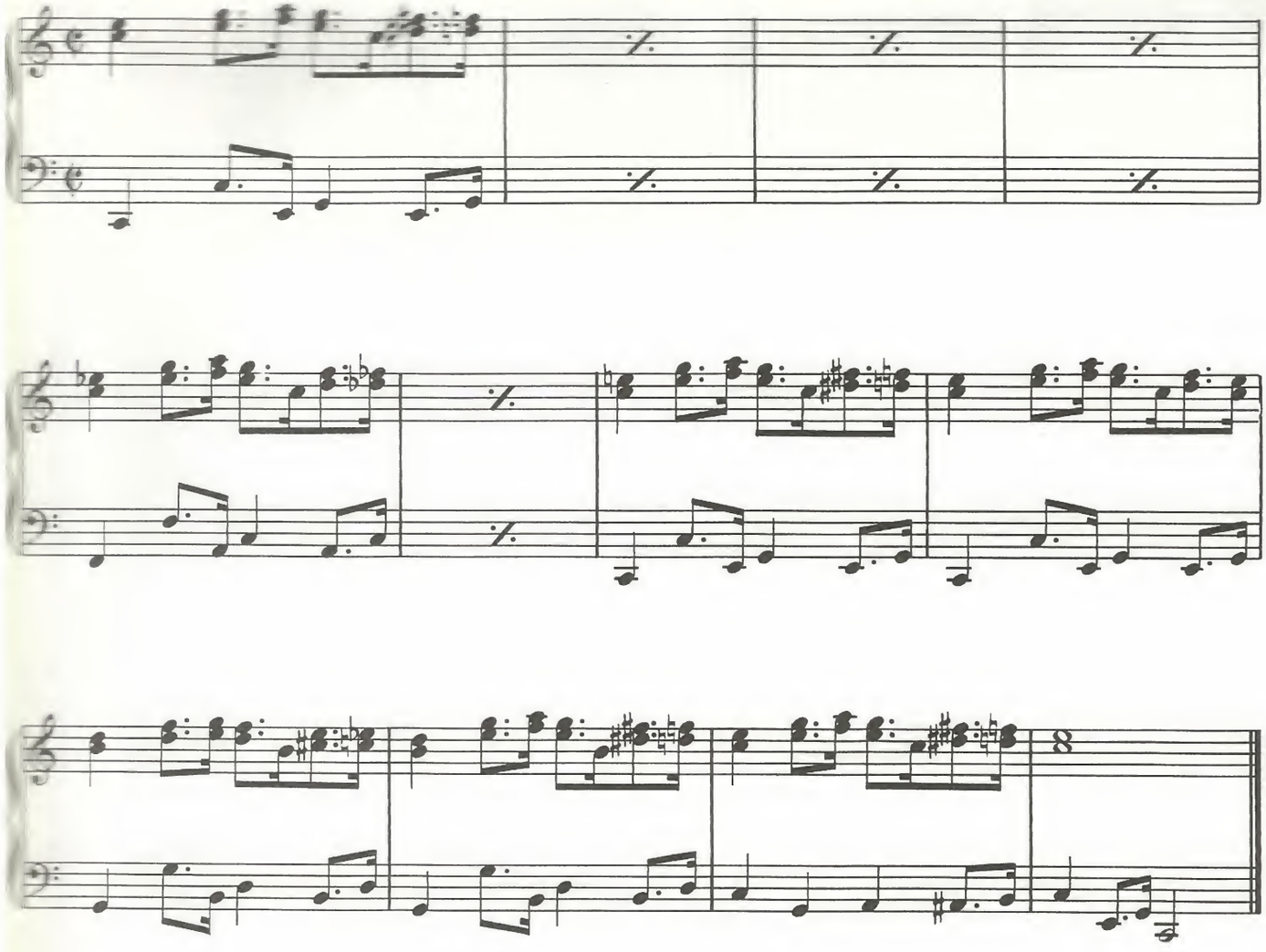

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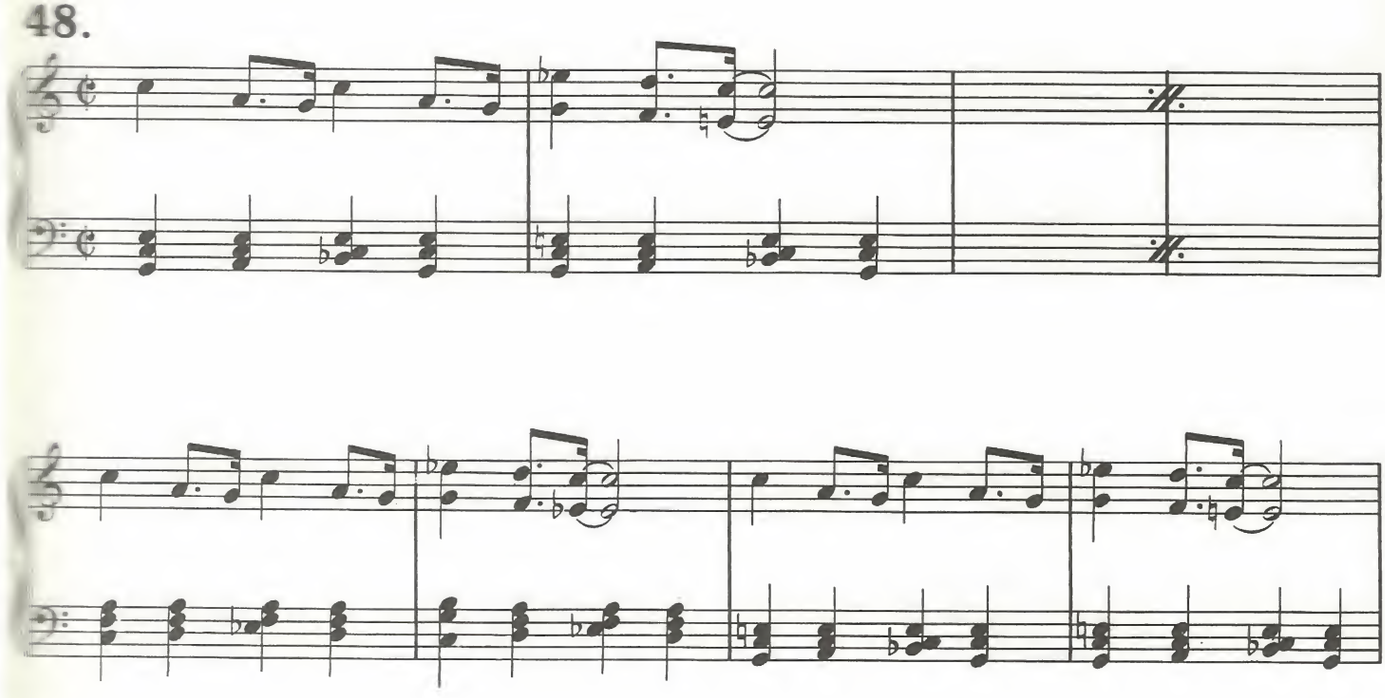

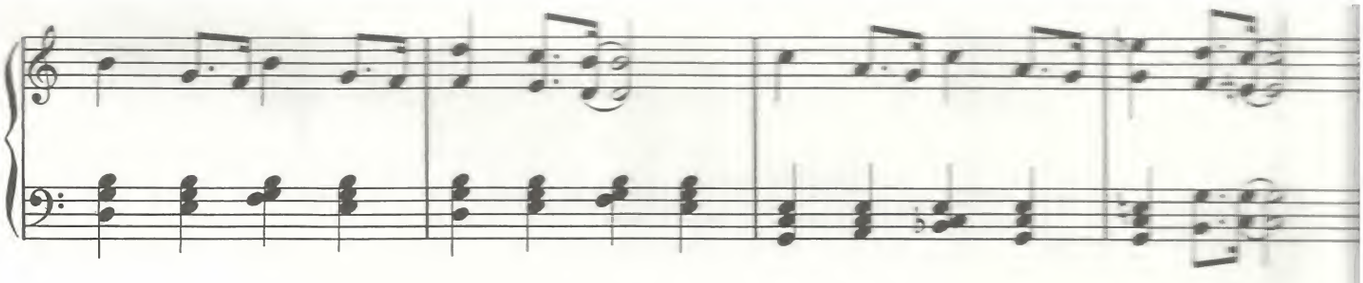

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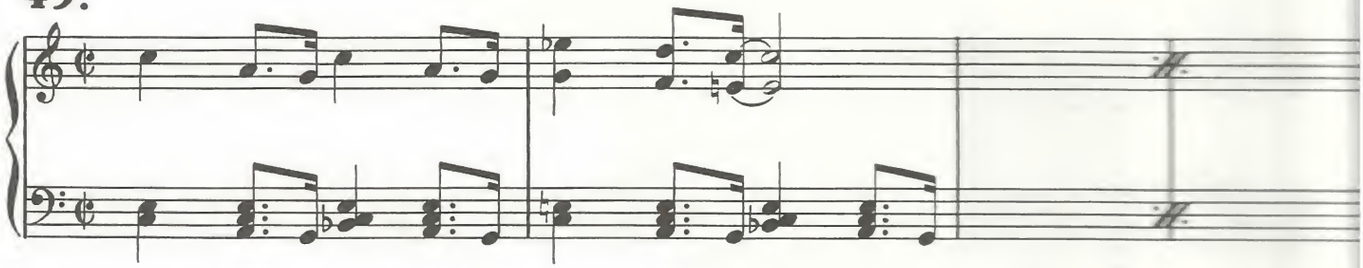

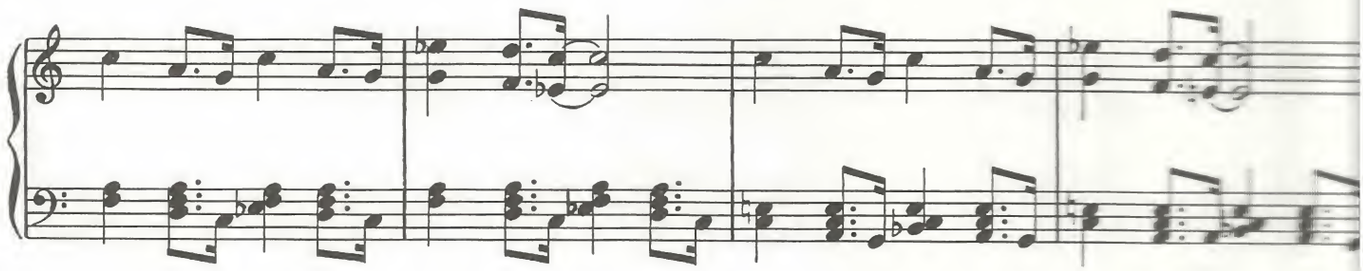

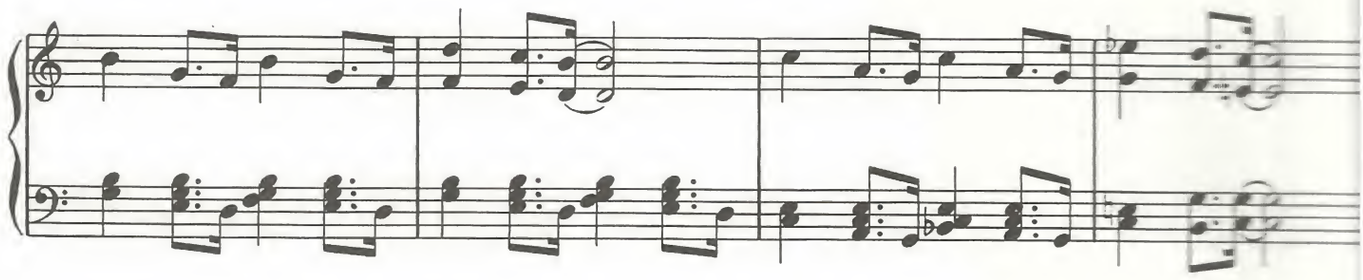

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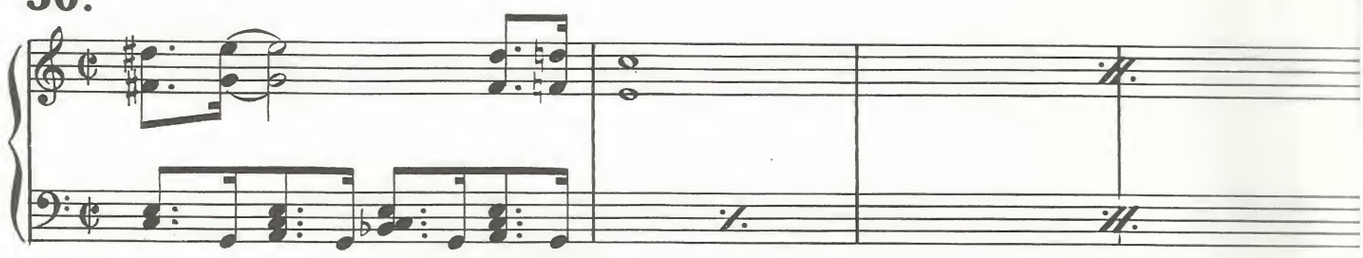

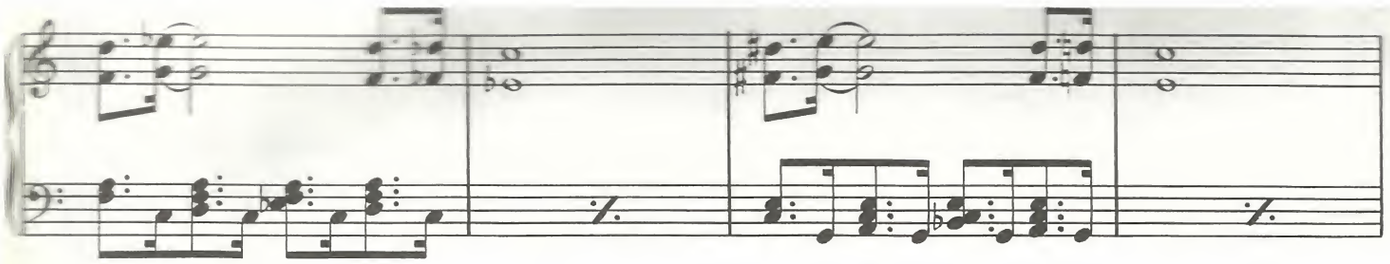

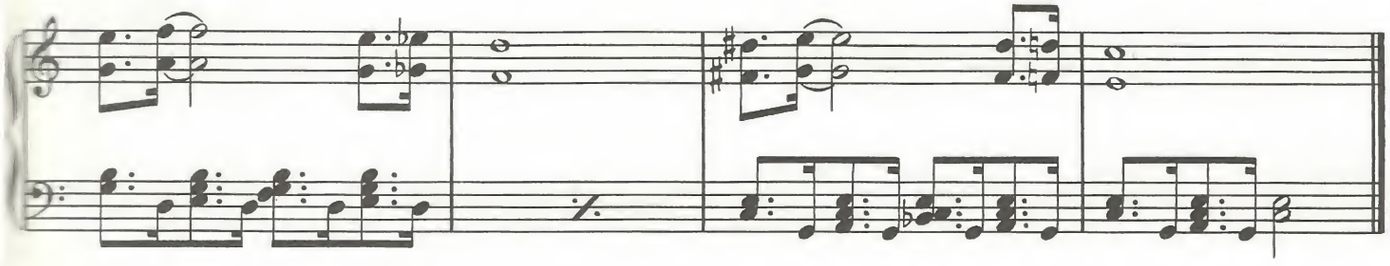

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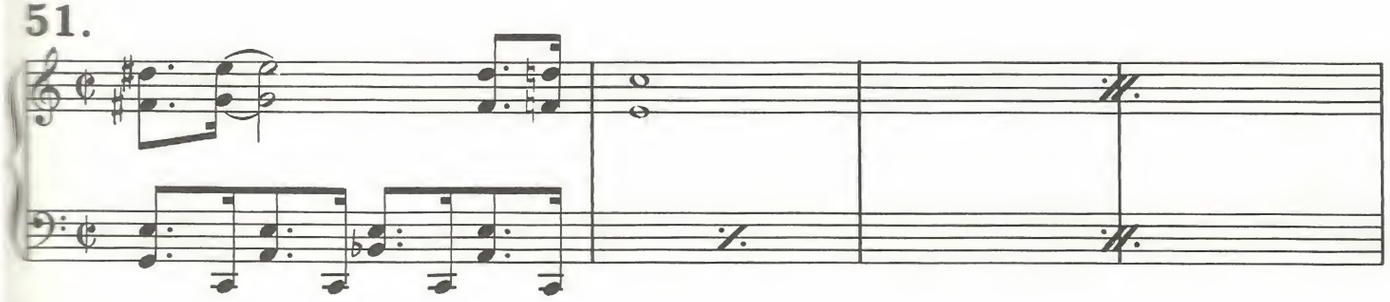

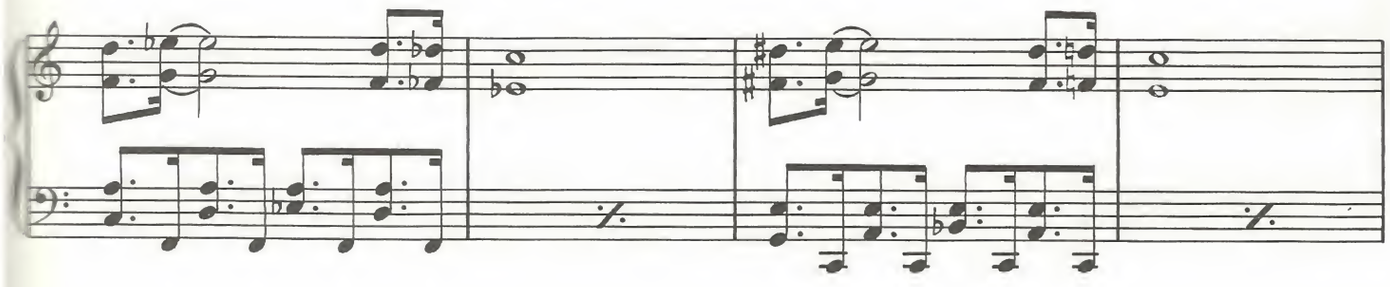

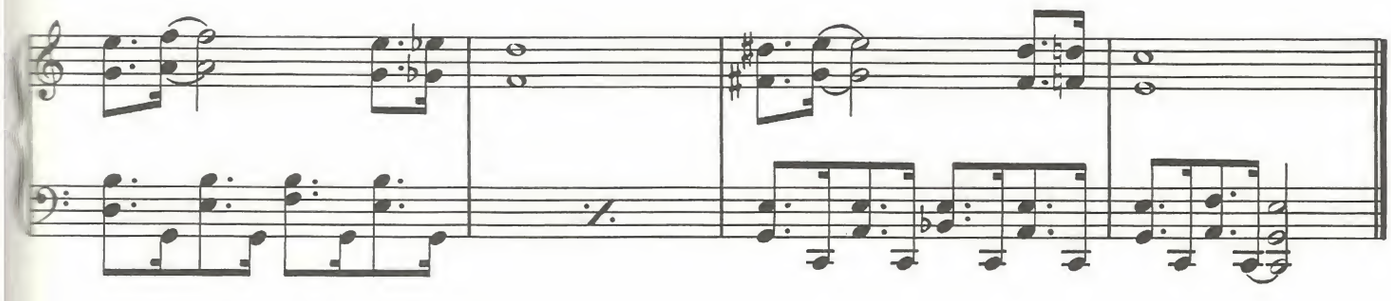

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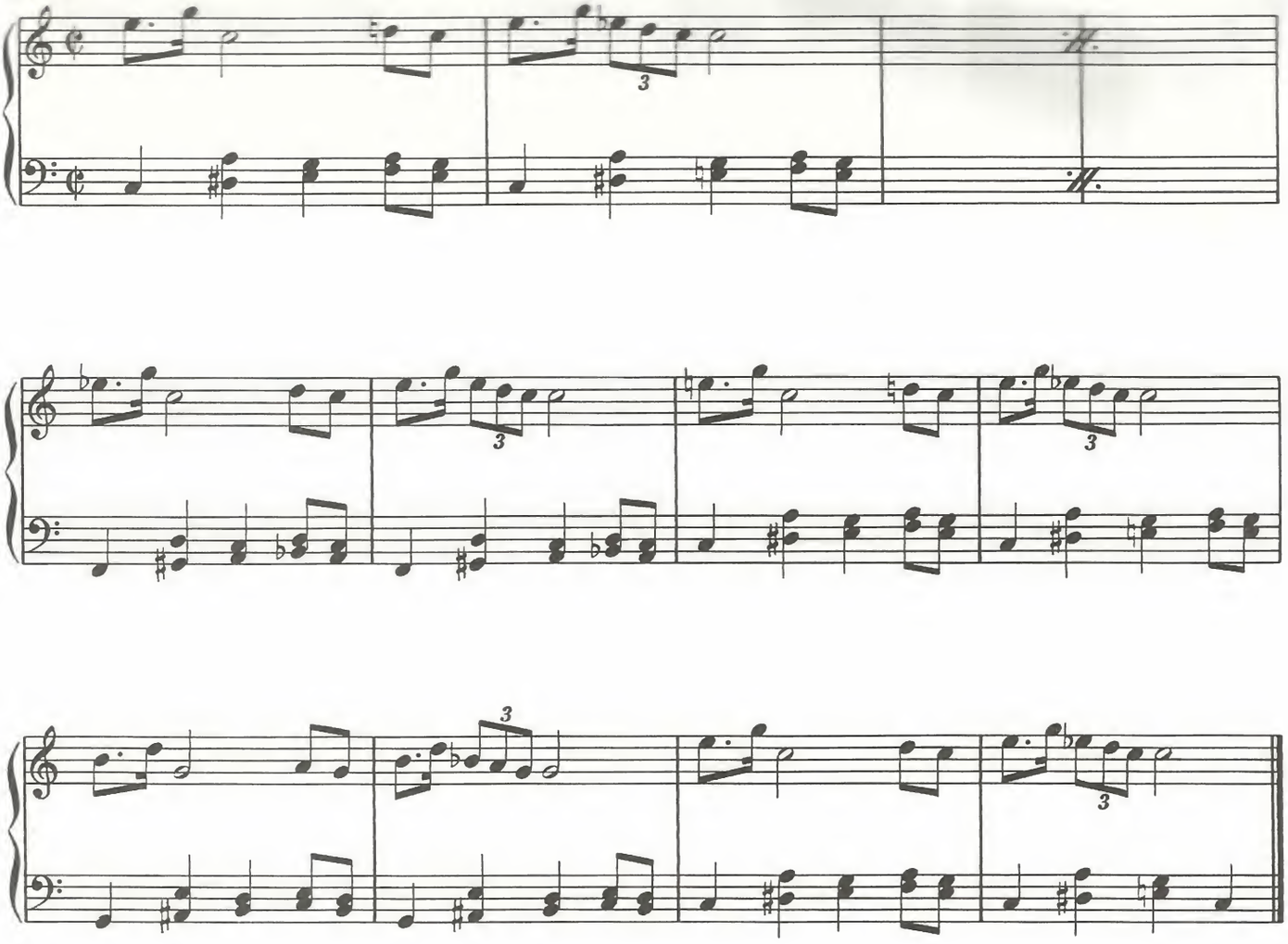

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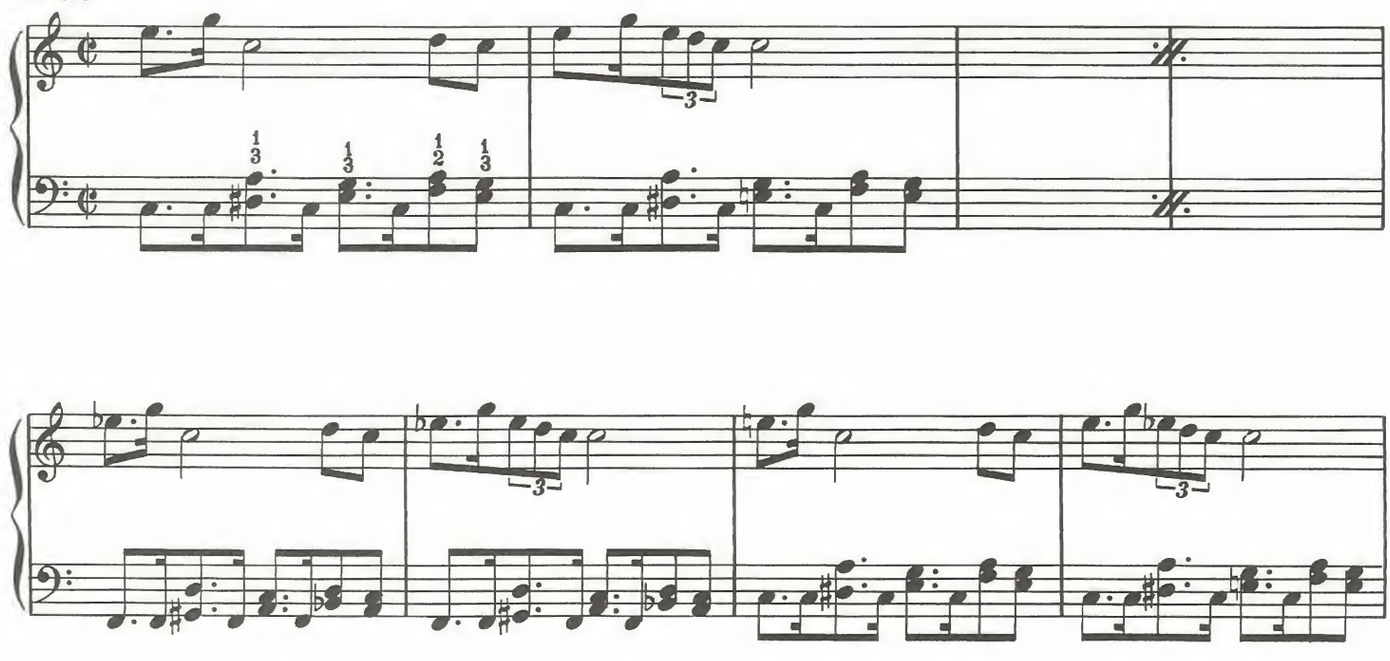

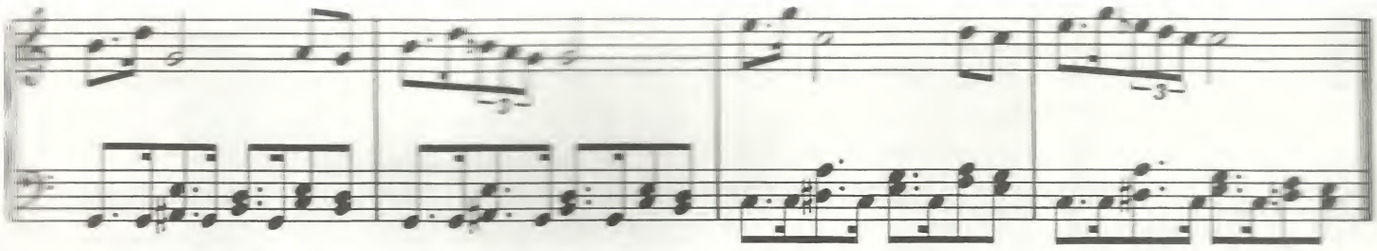

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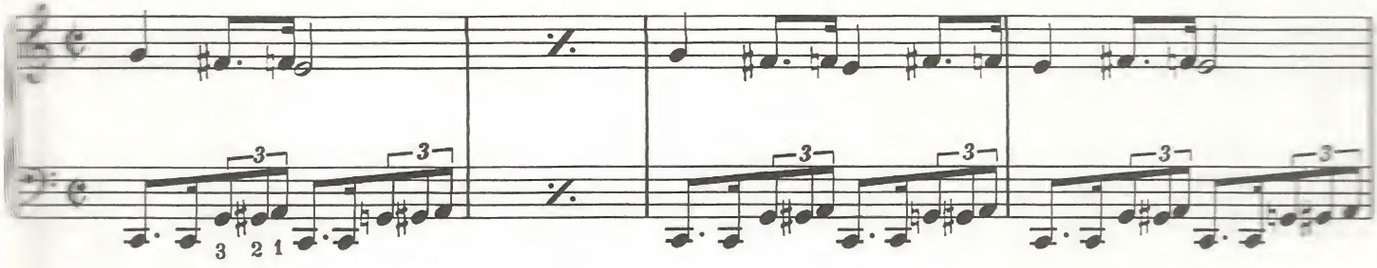

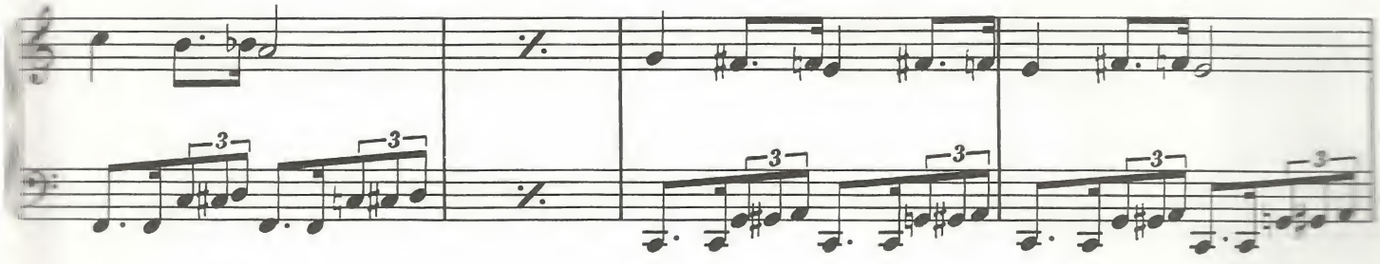

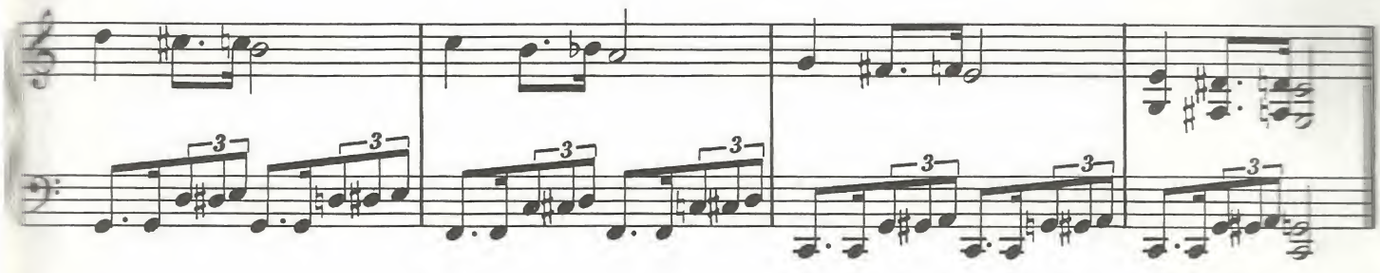

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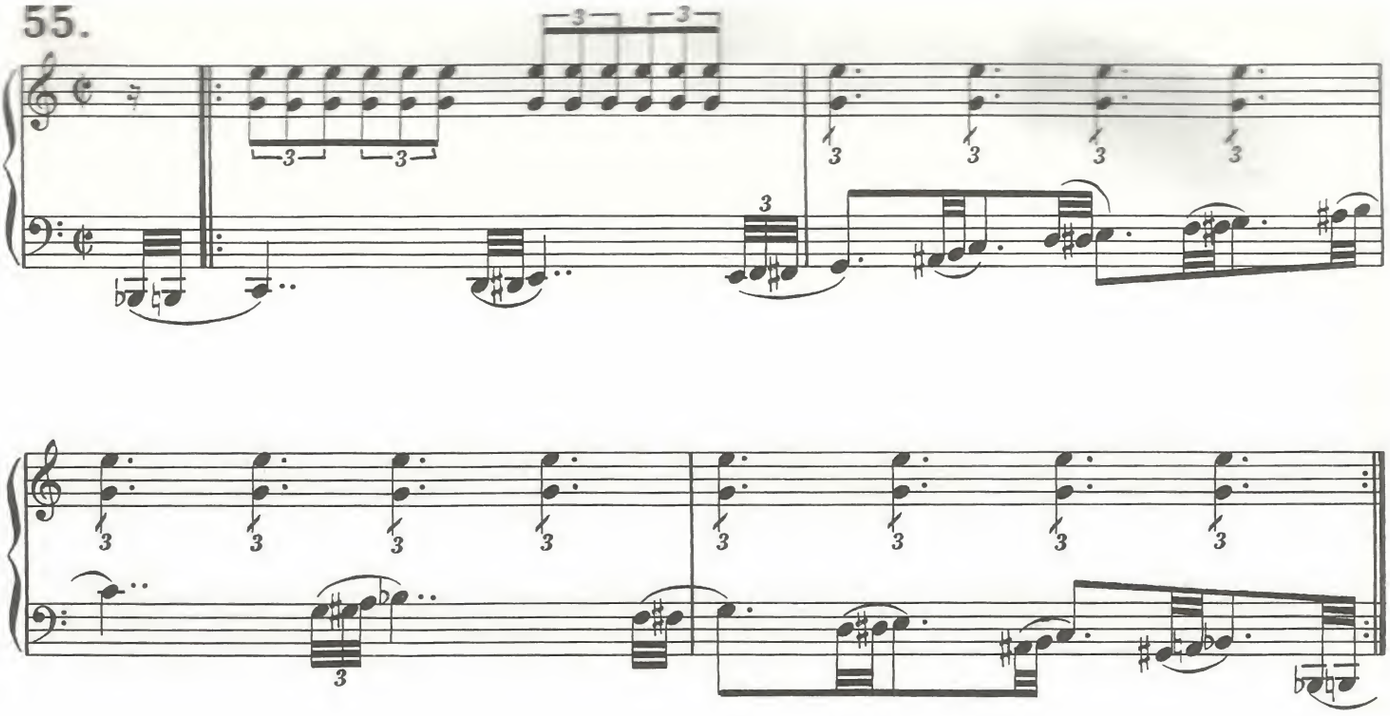

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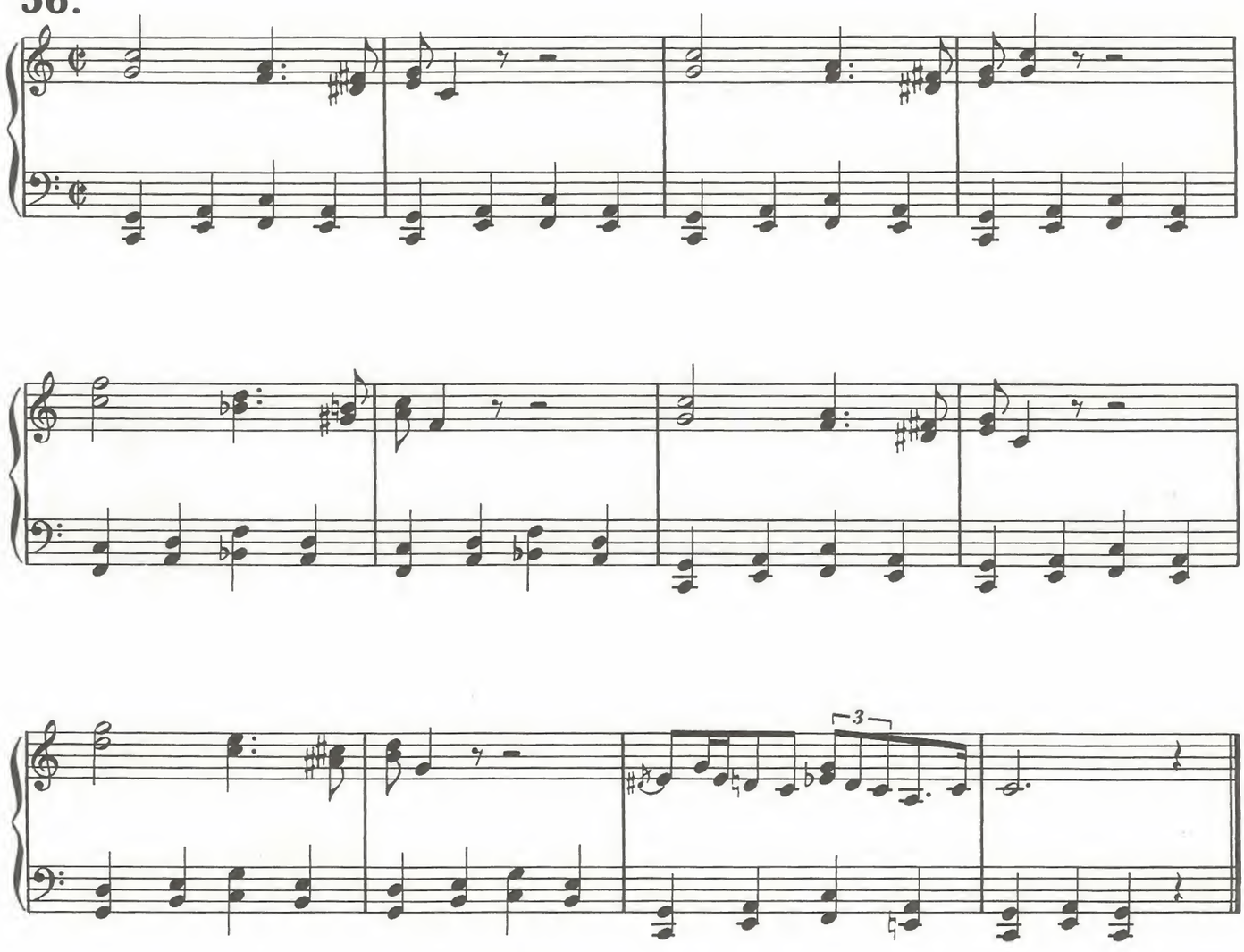

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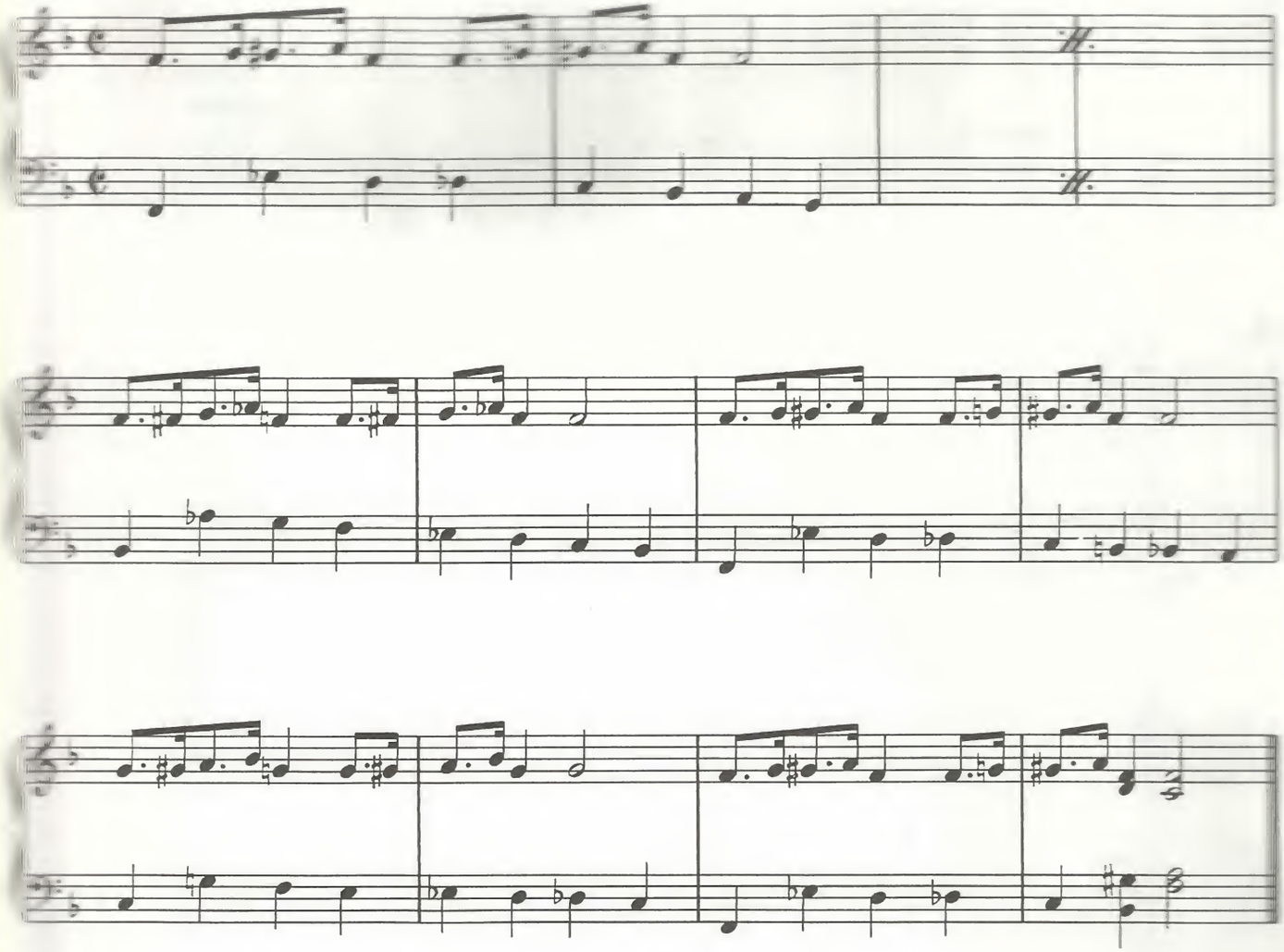

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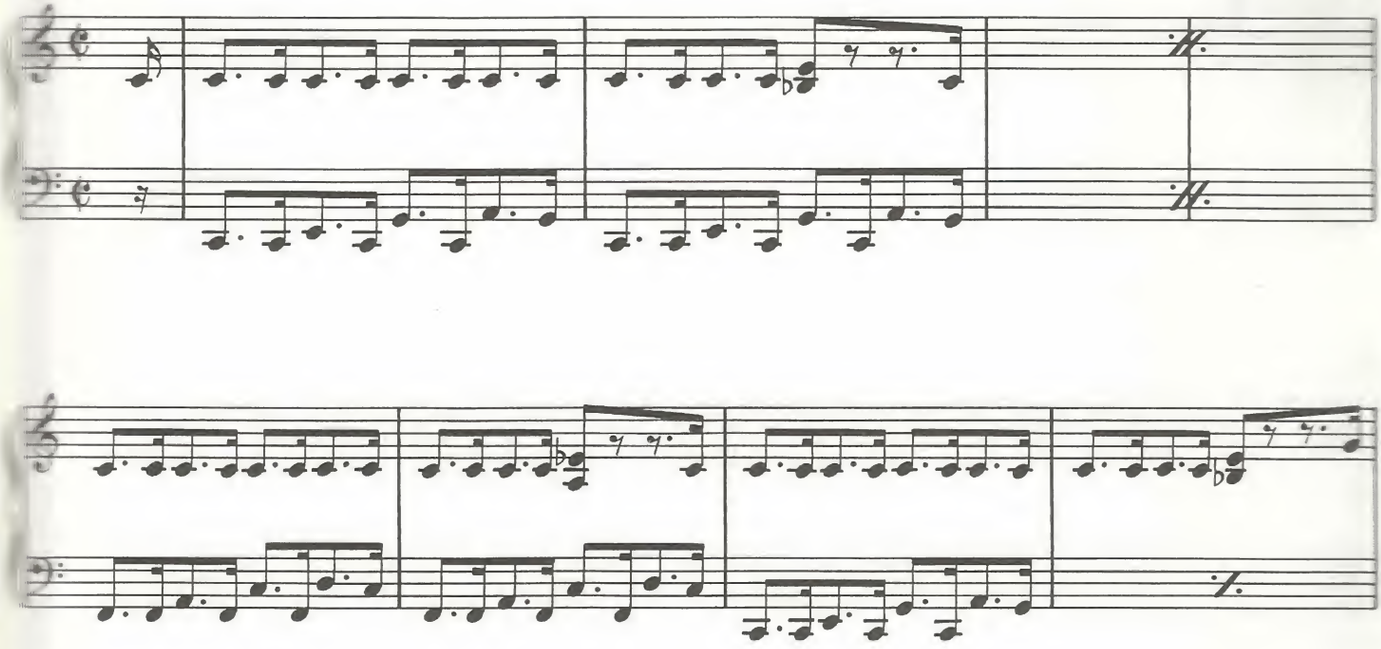

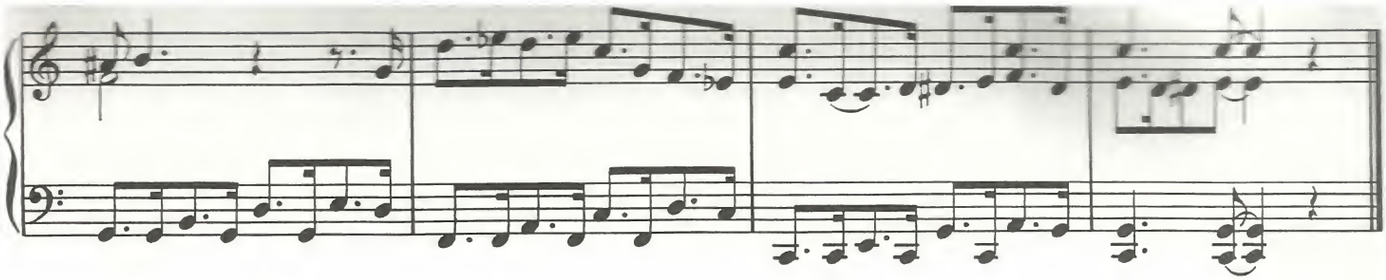

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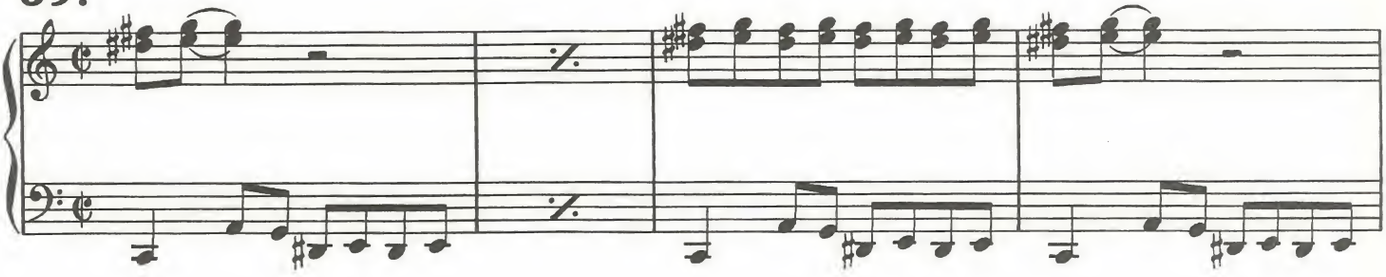

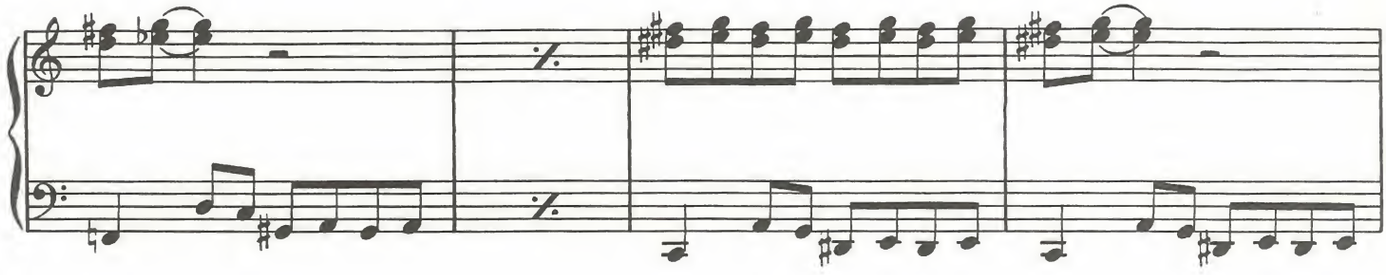

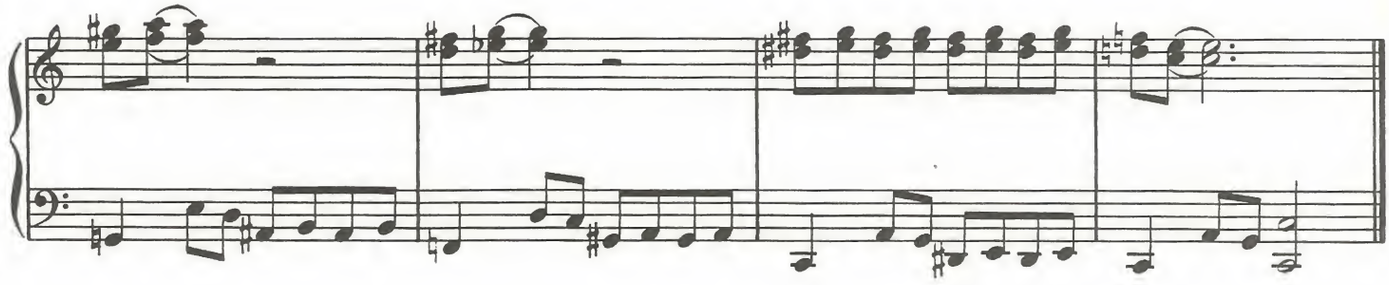

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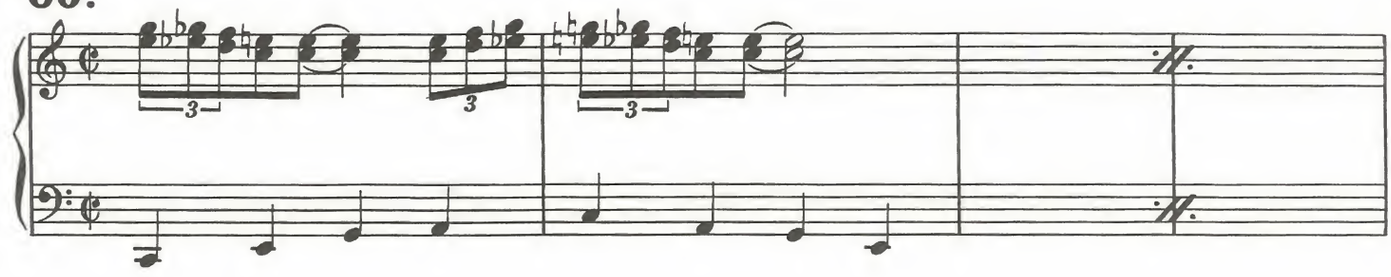

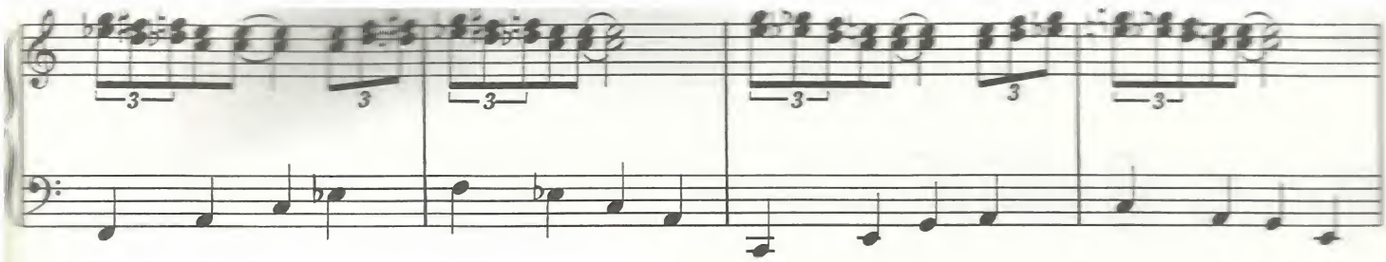

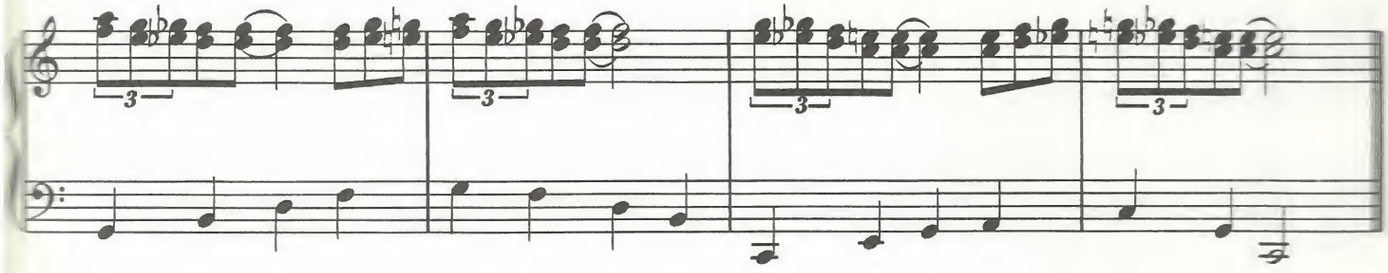

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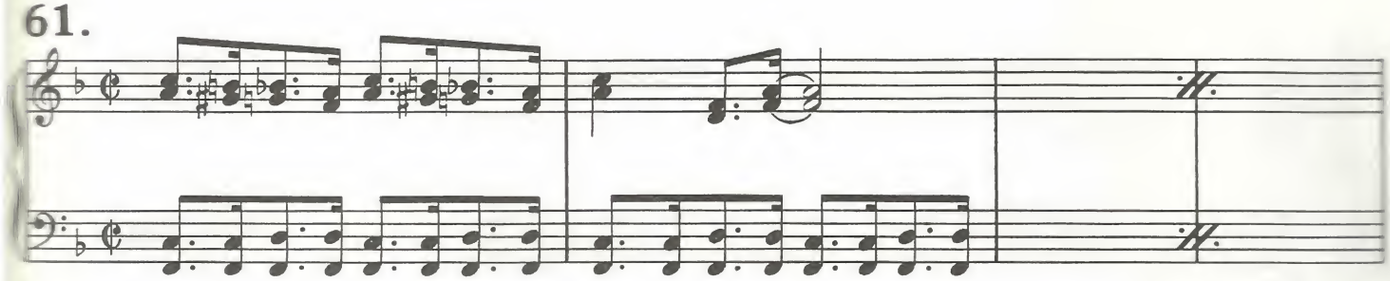

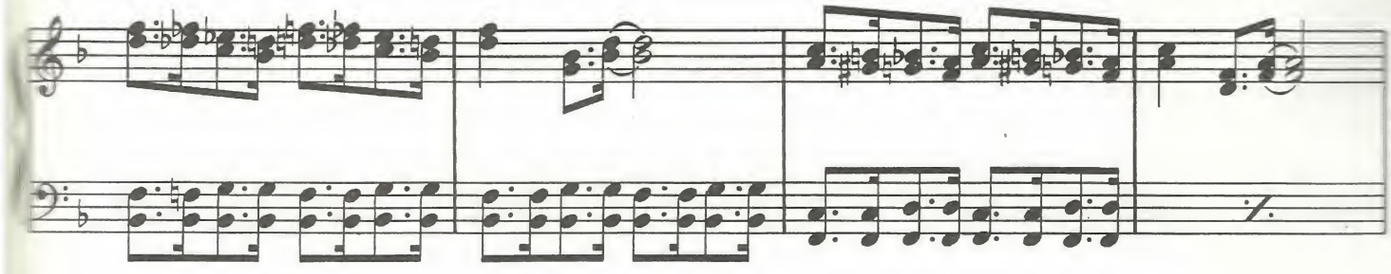

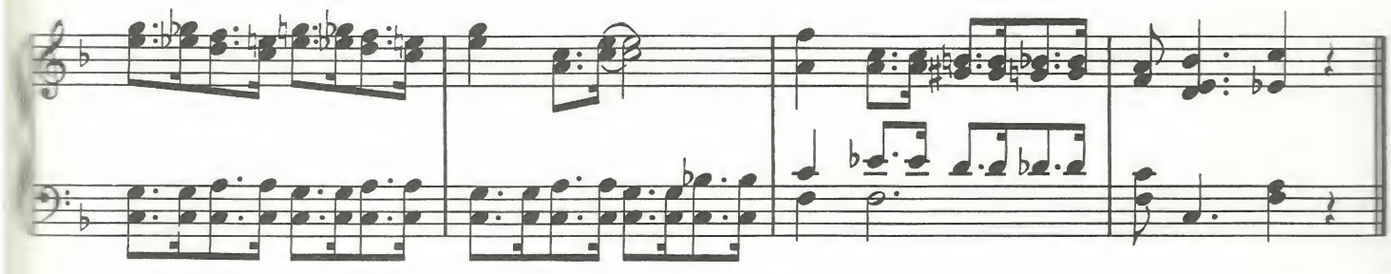

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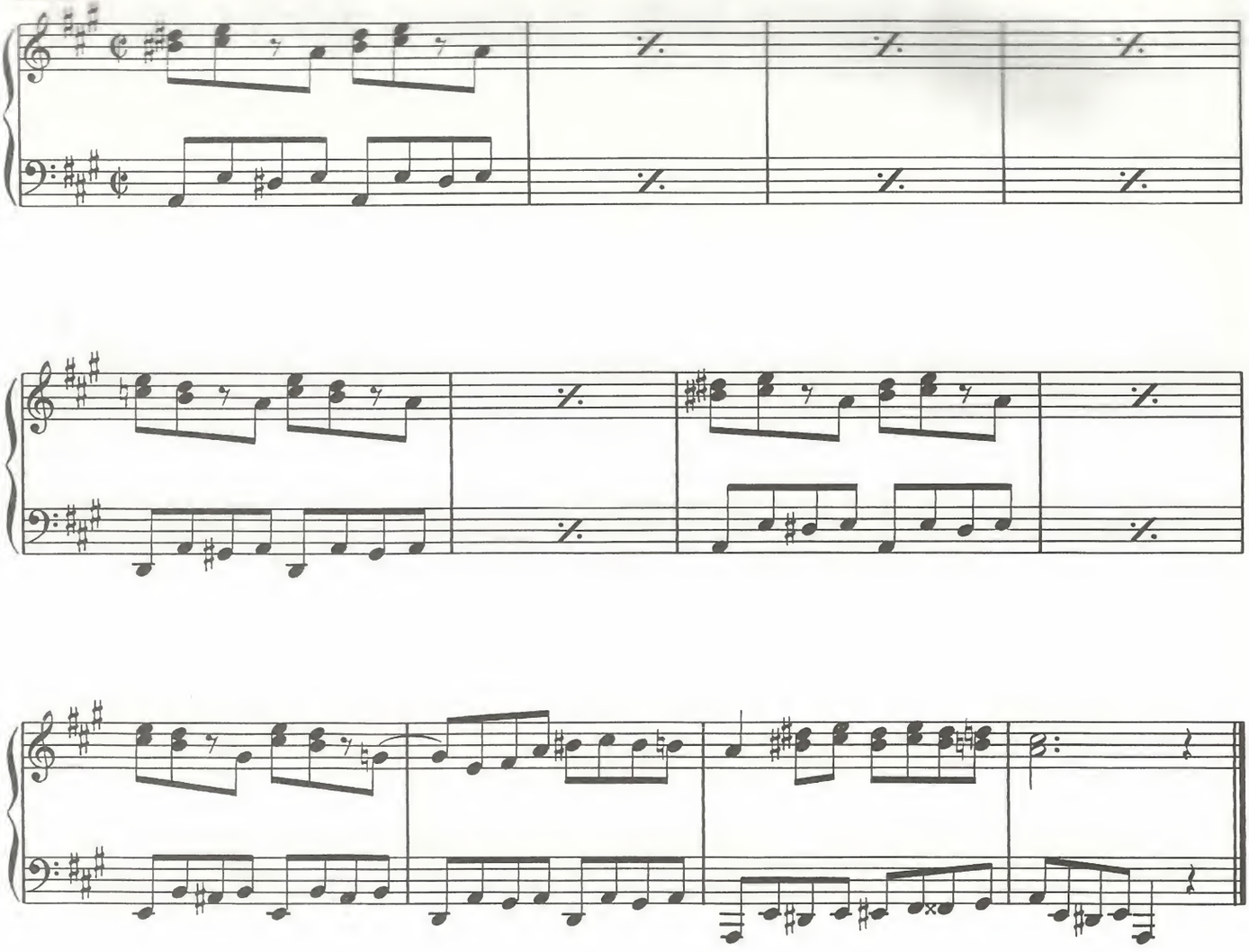

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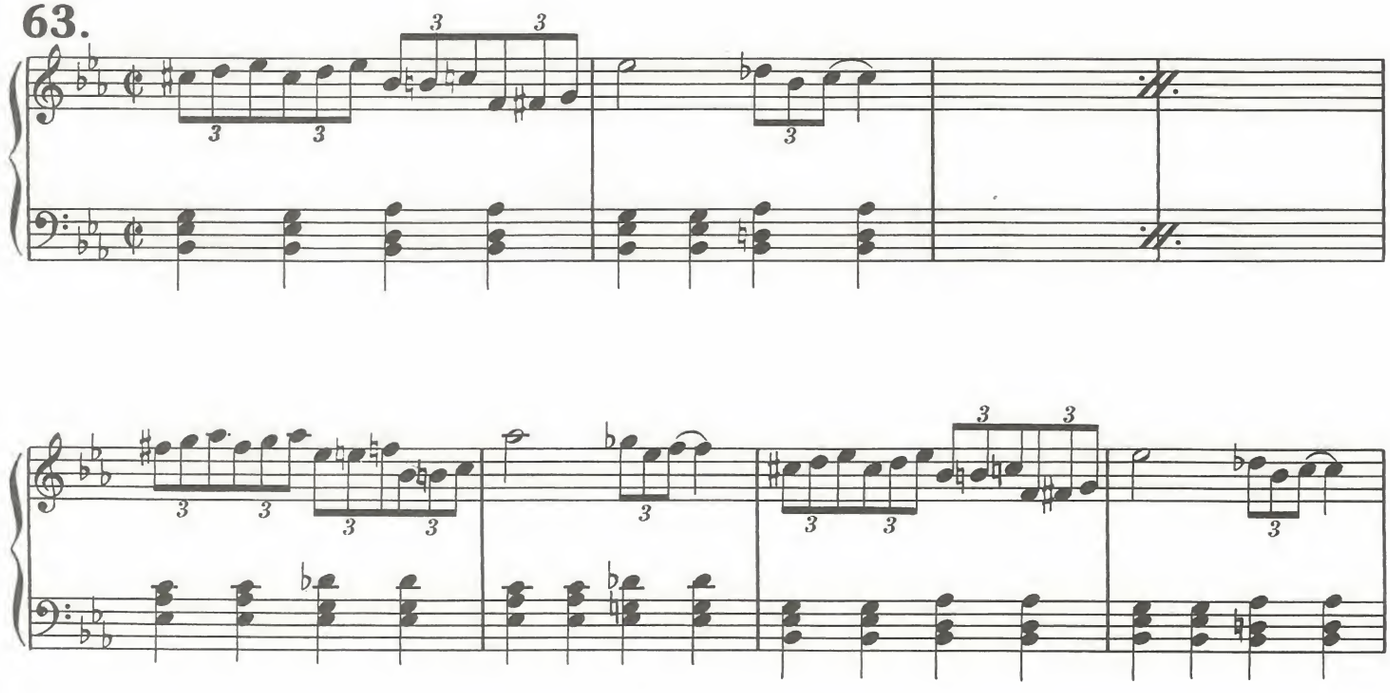

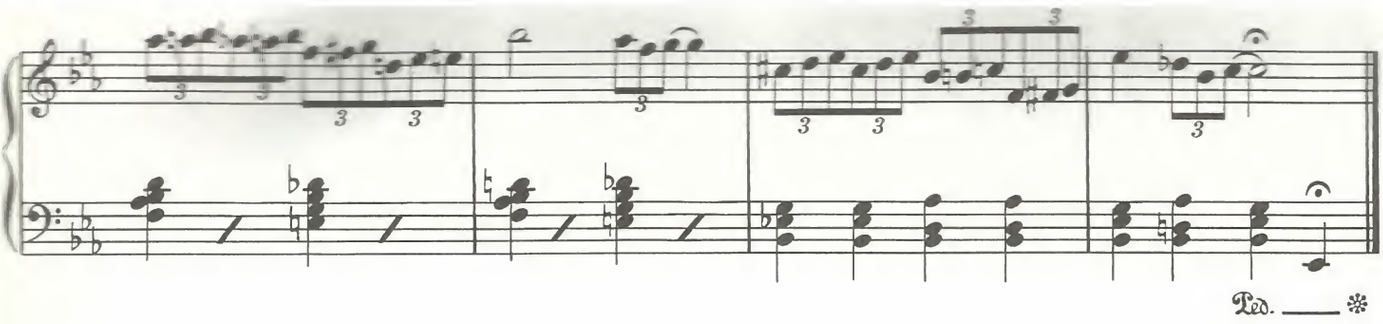

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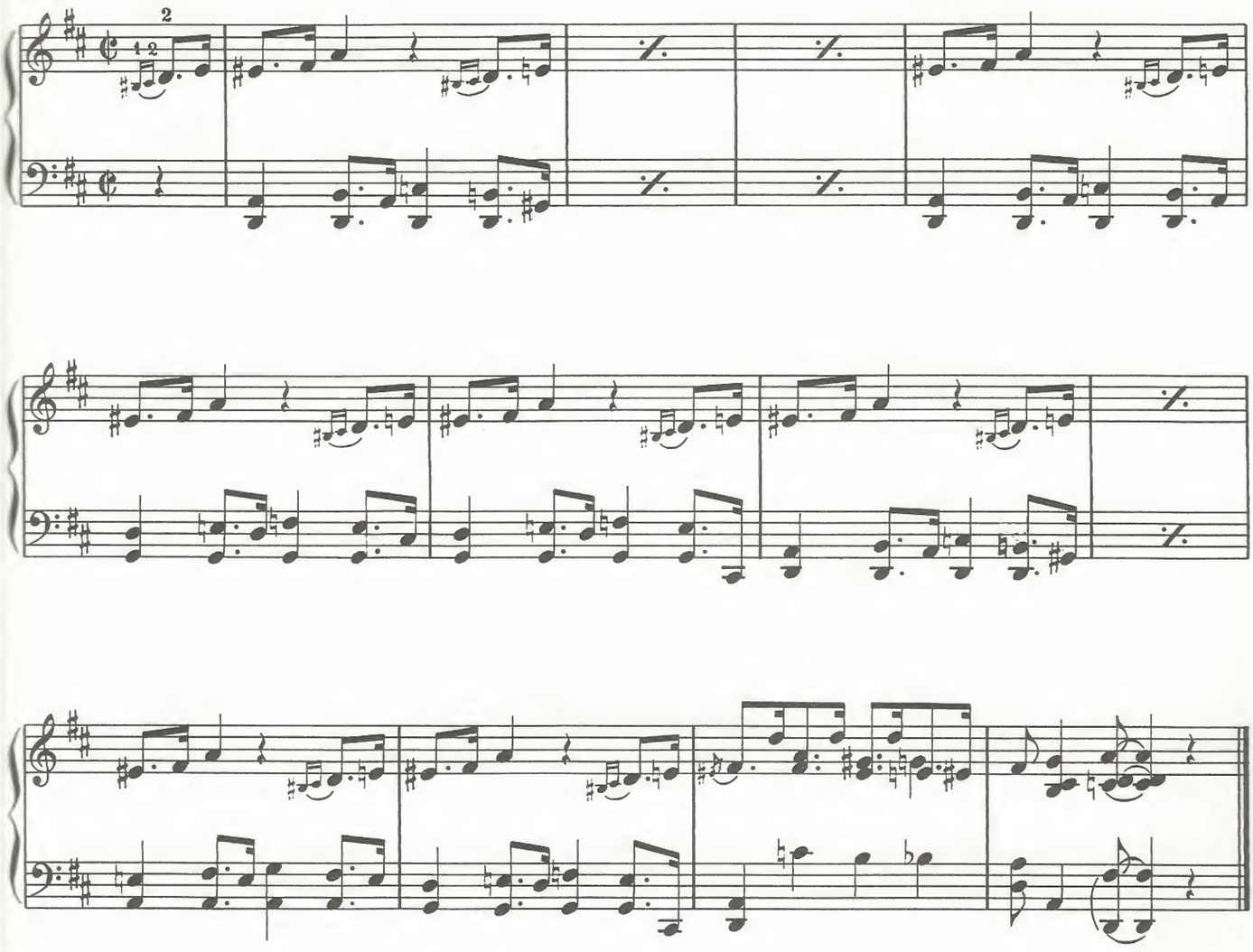

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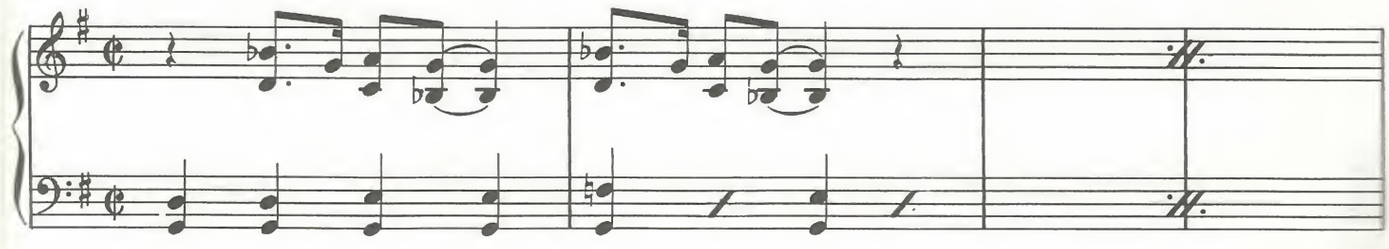

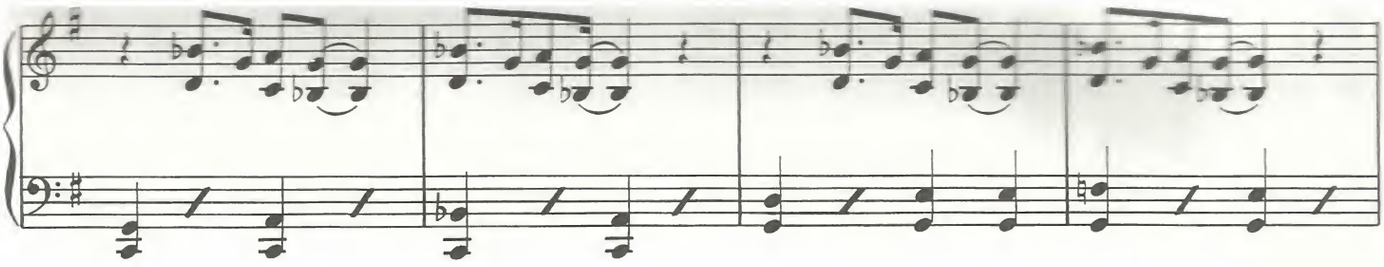

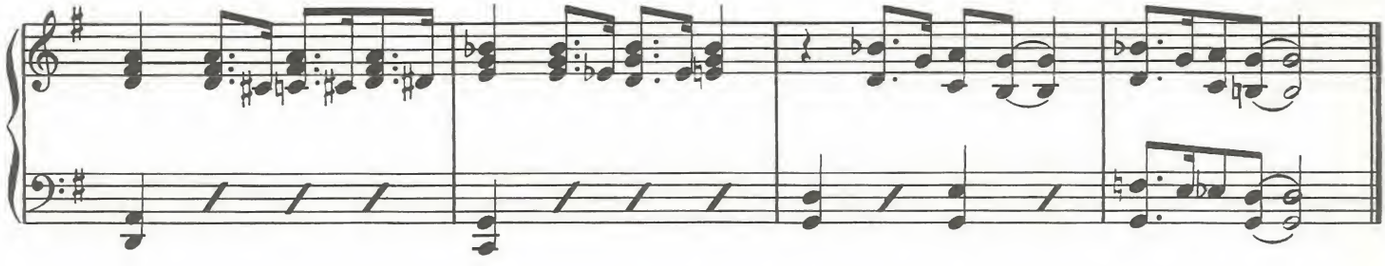

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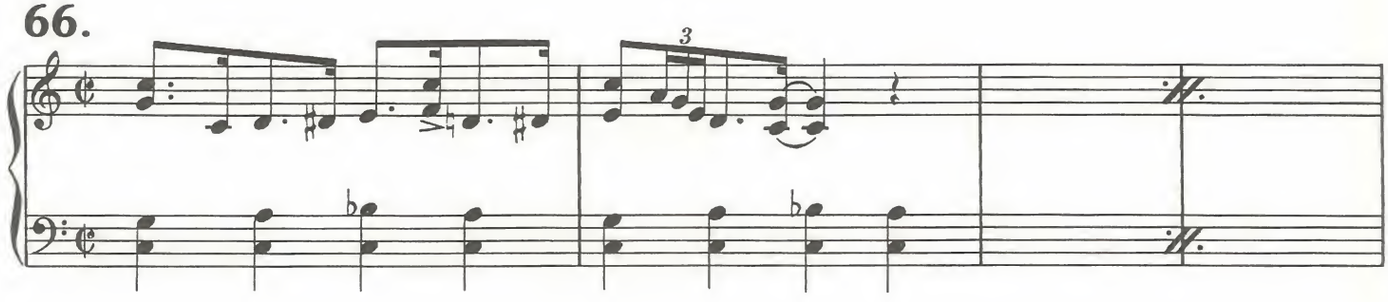

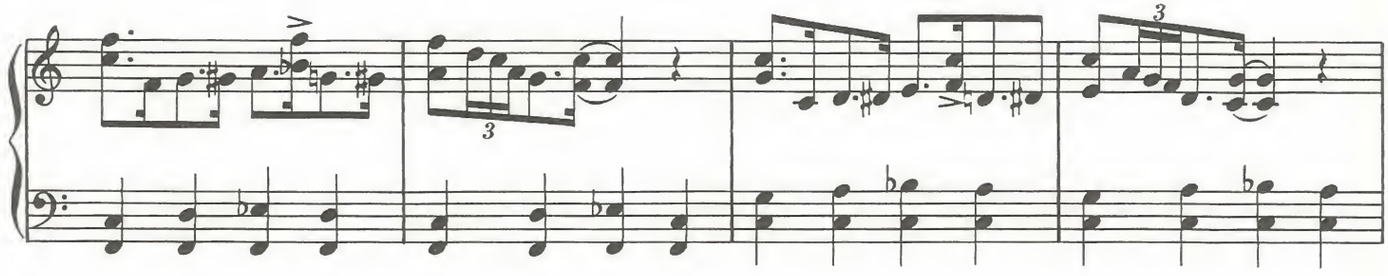

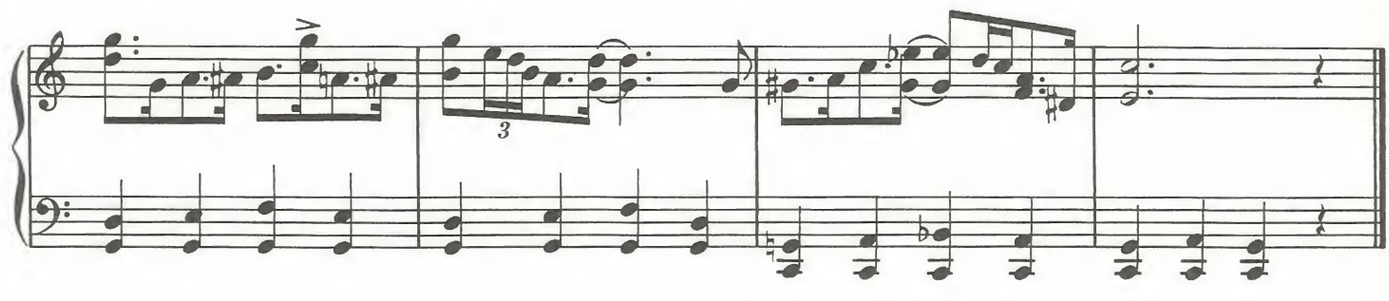

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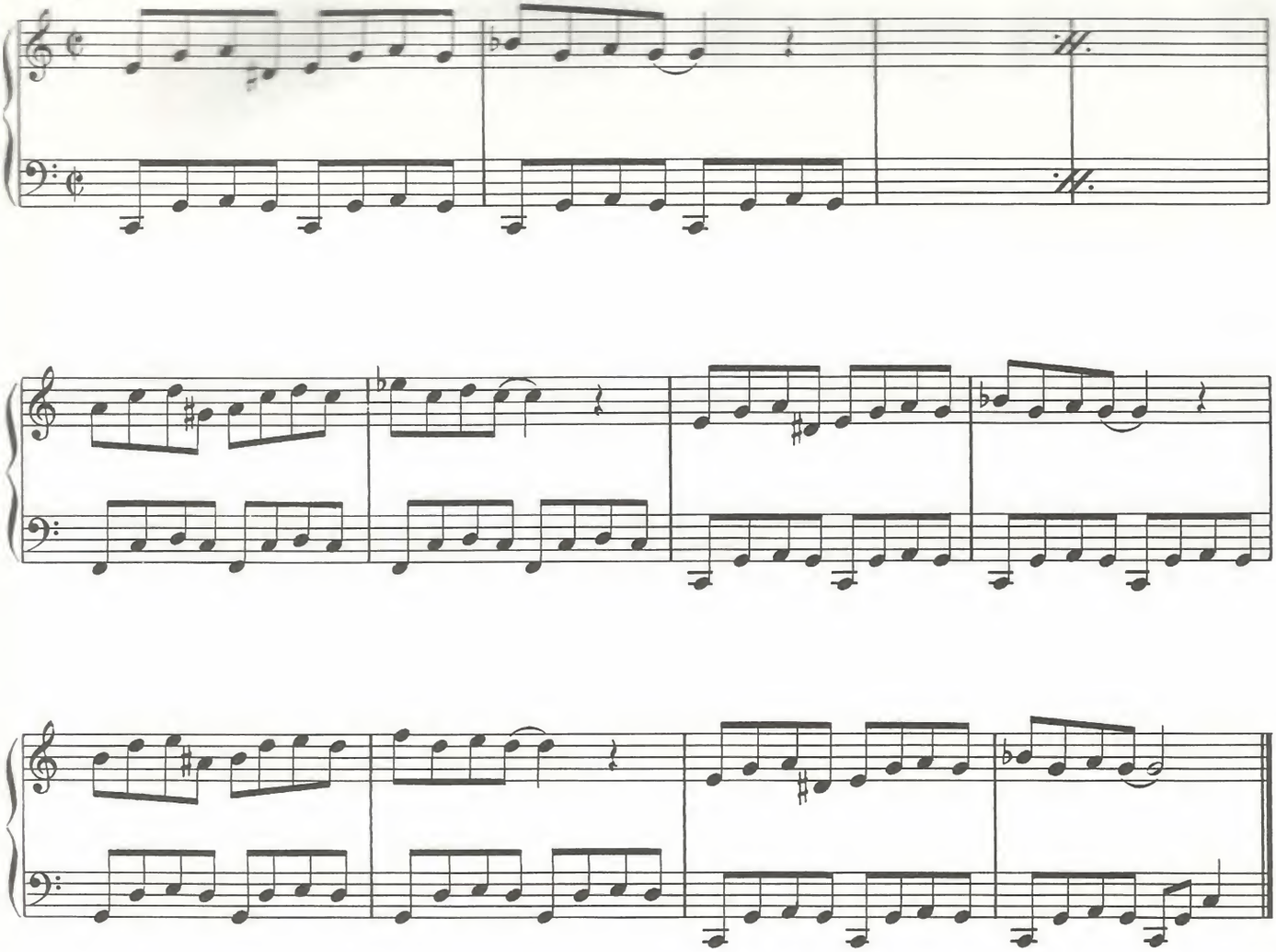

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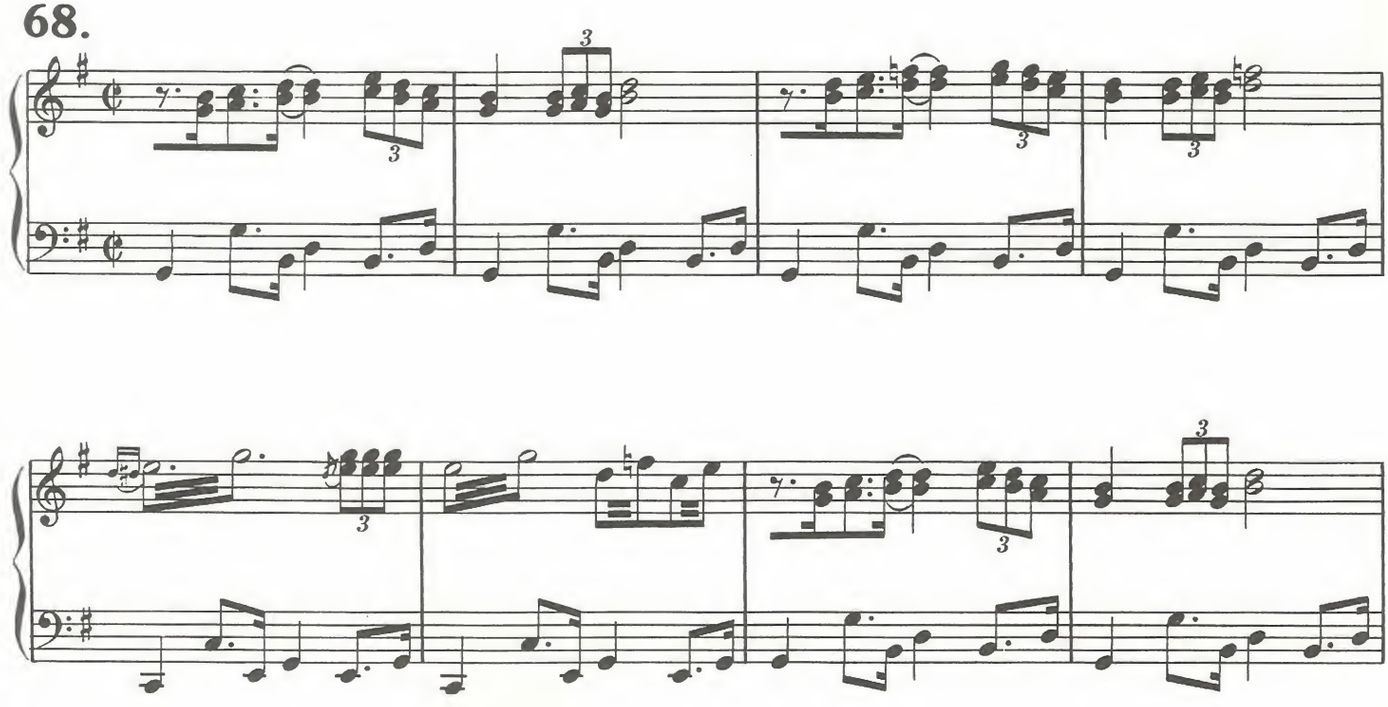

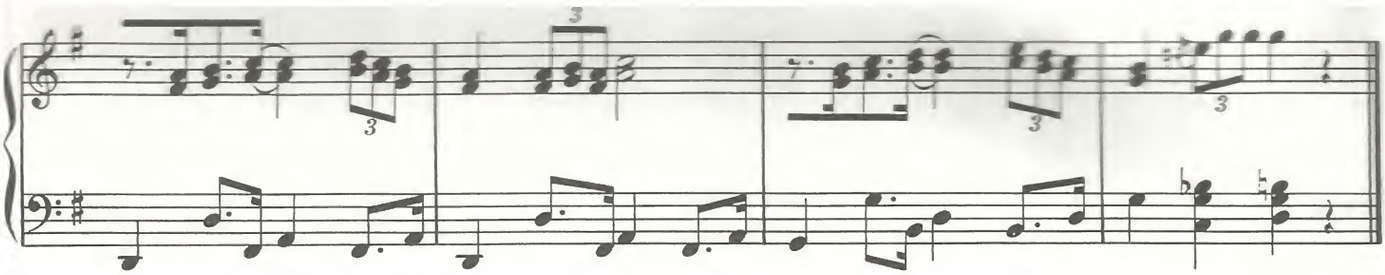

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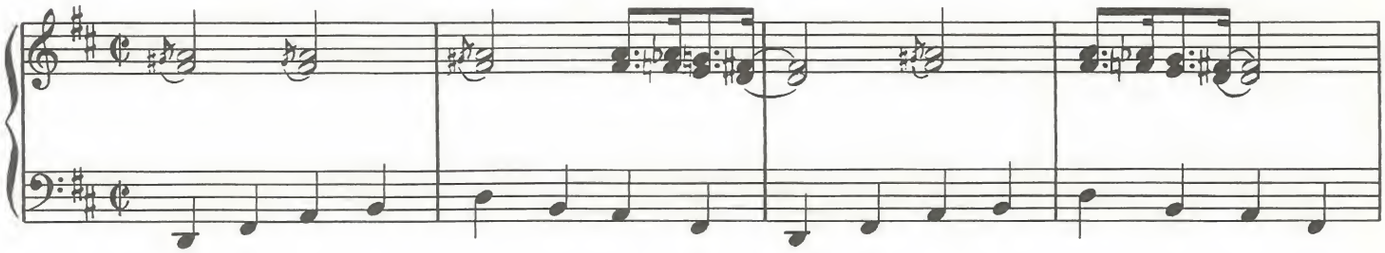

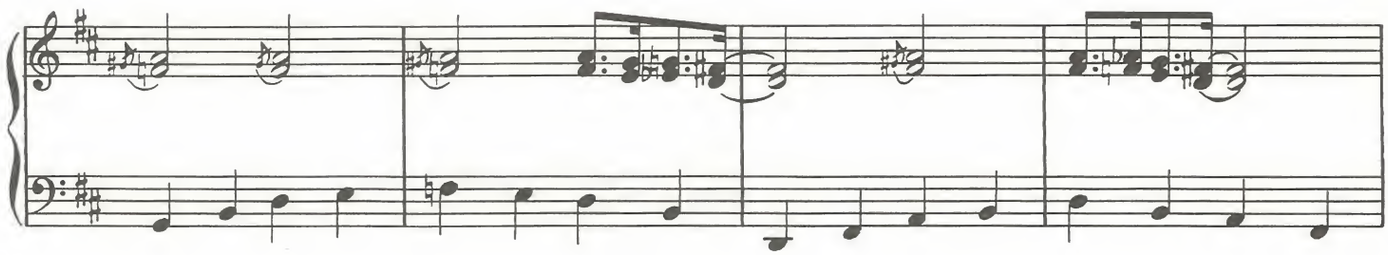

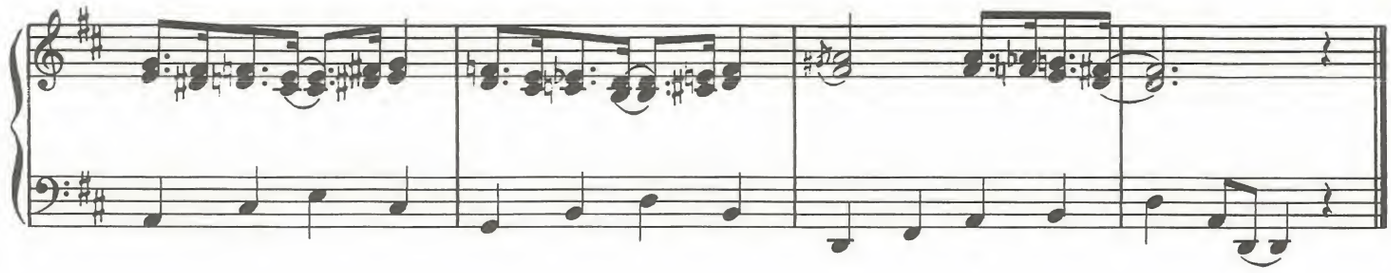

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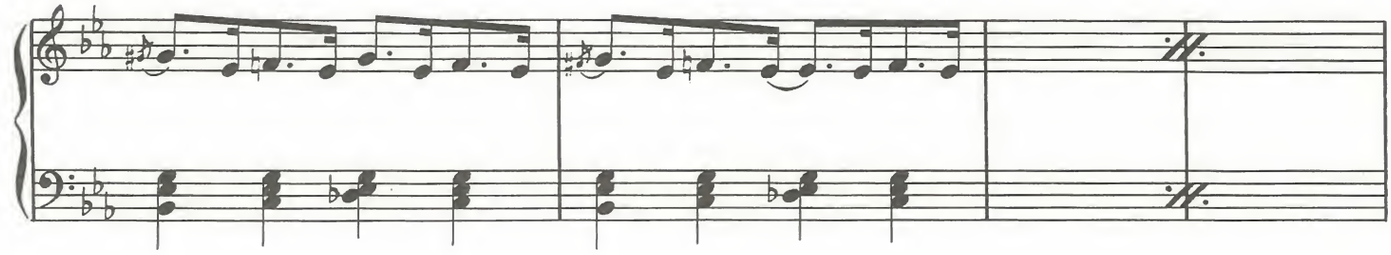

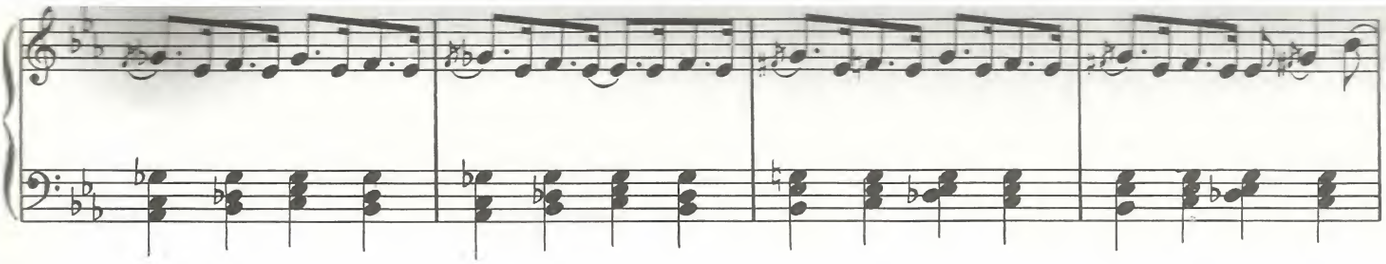

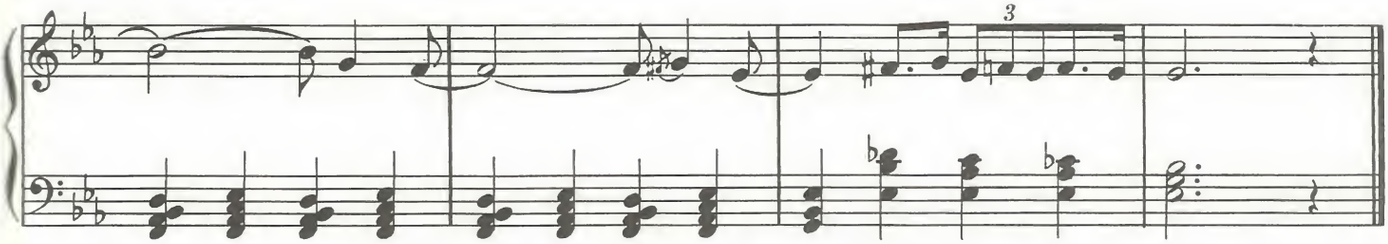

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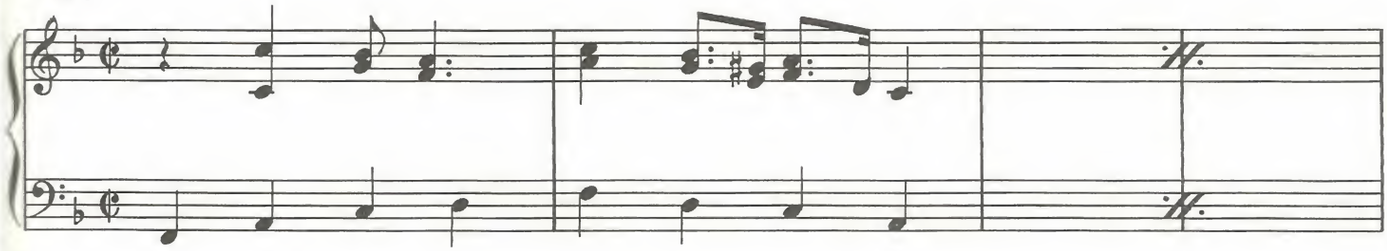

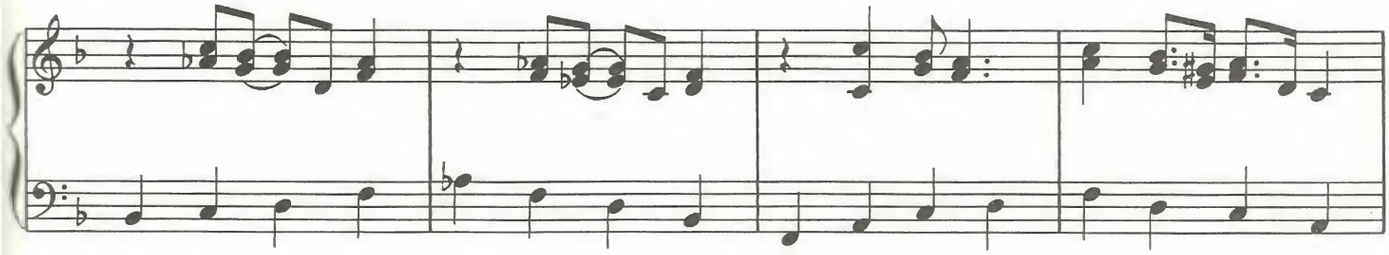

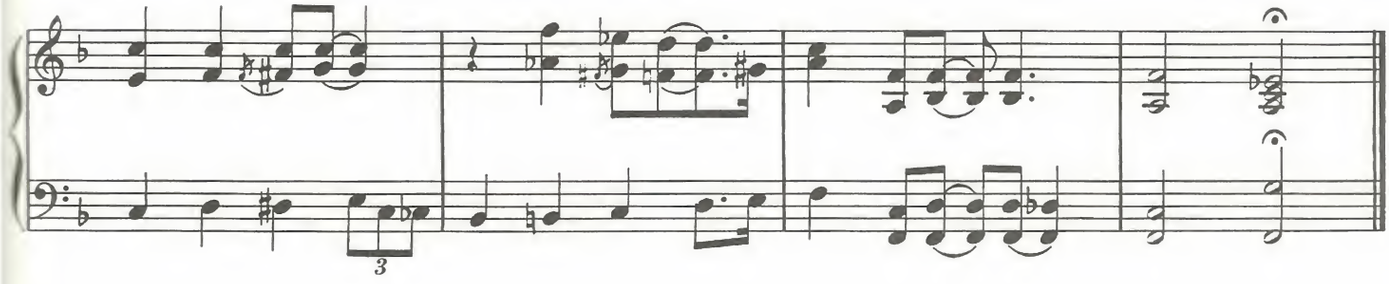

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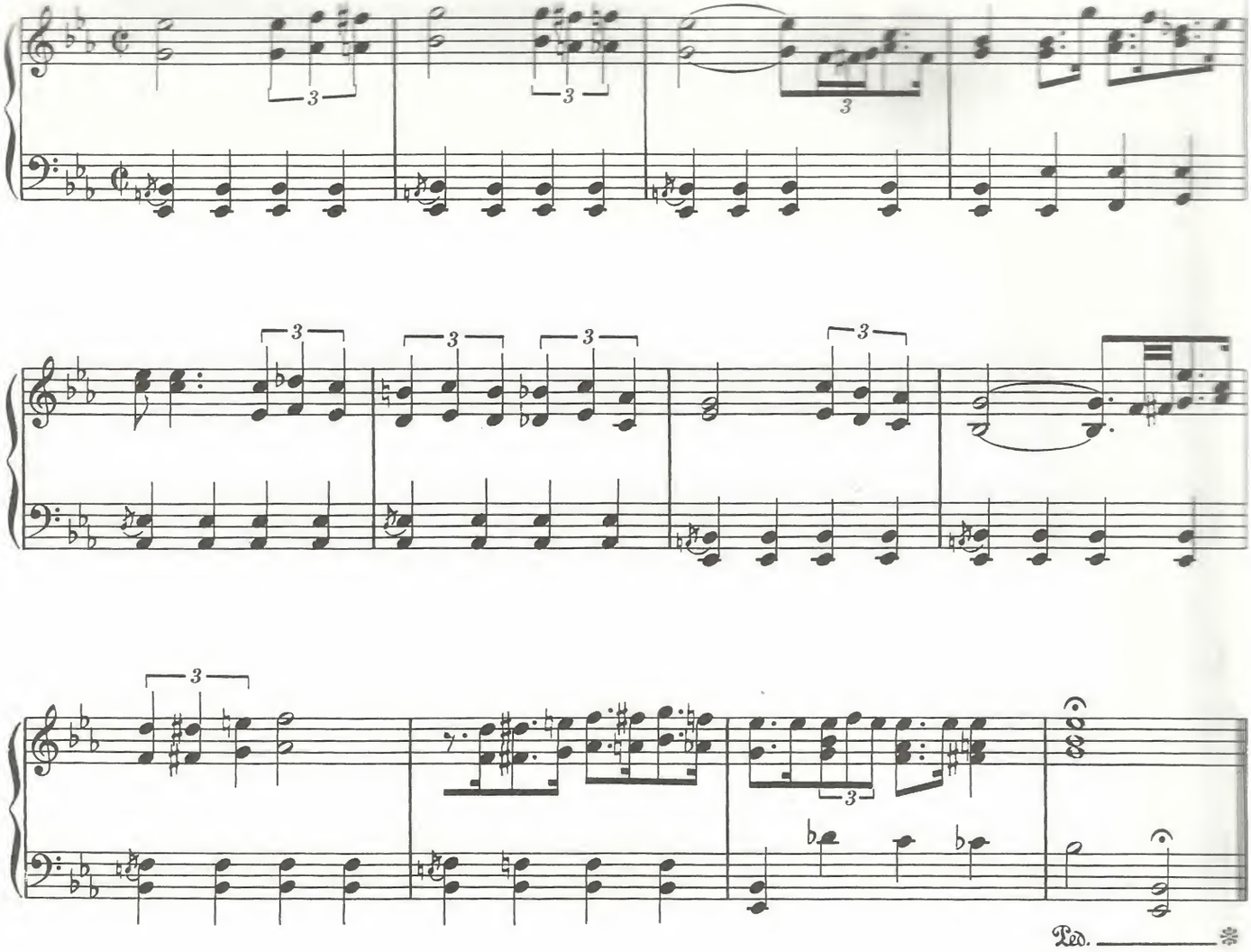
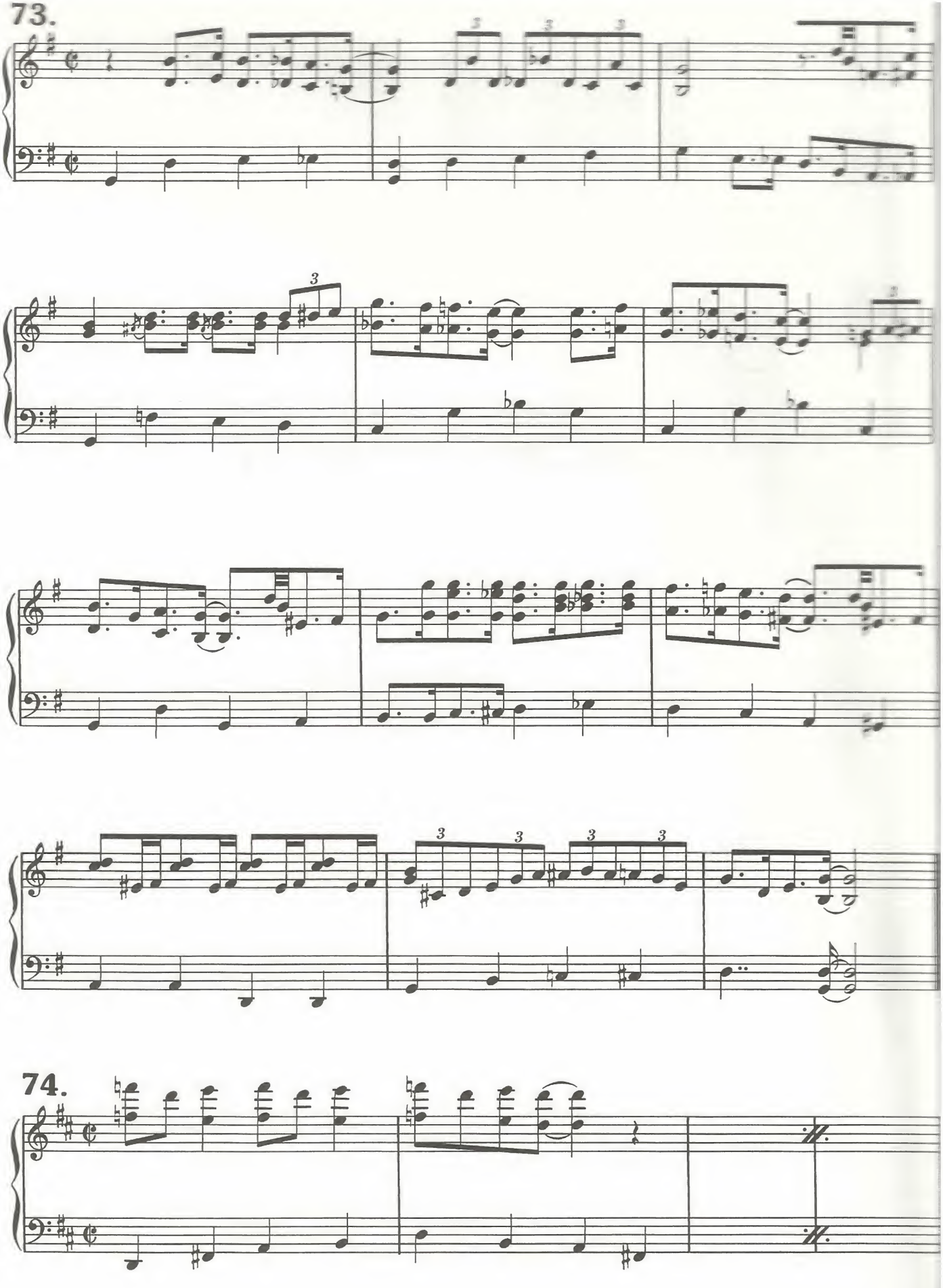


Exercises—Part II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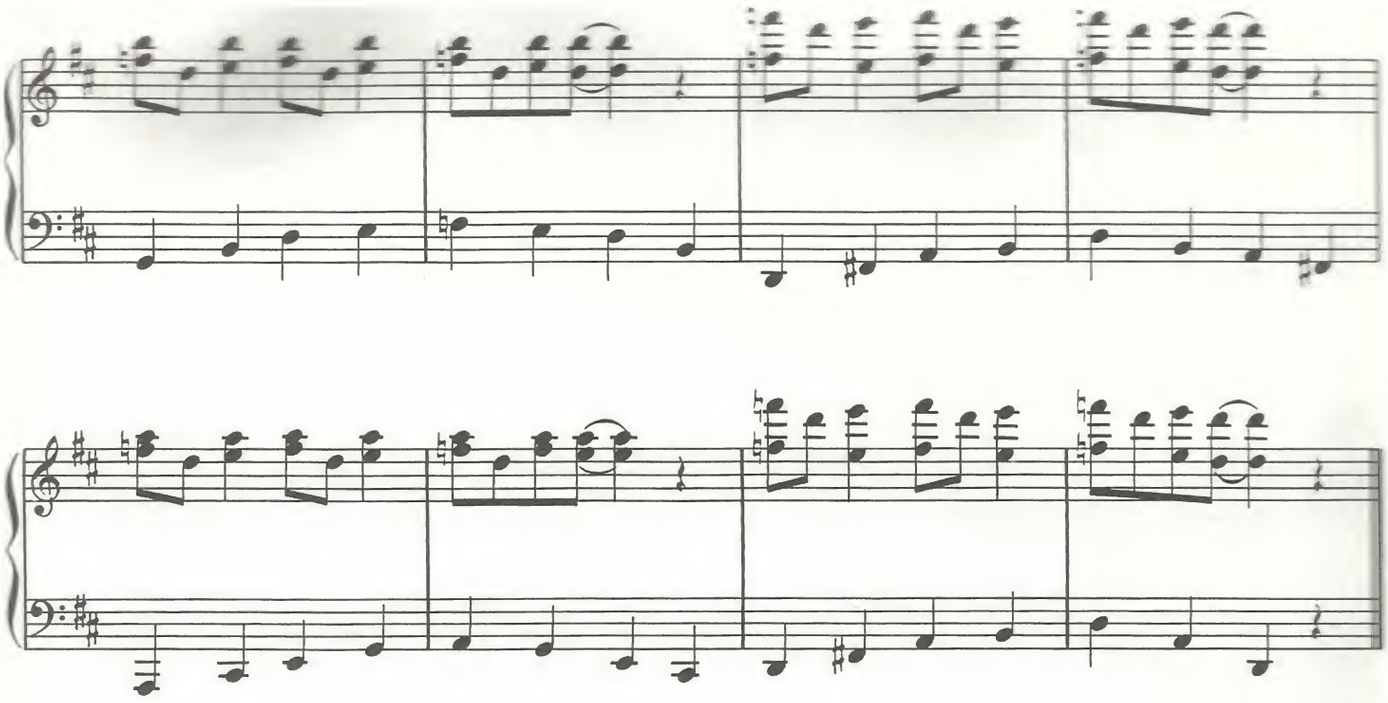

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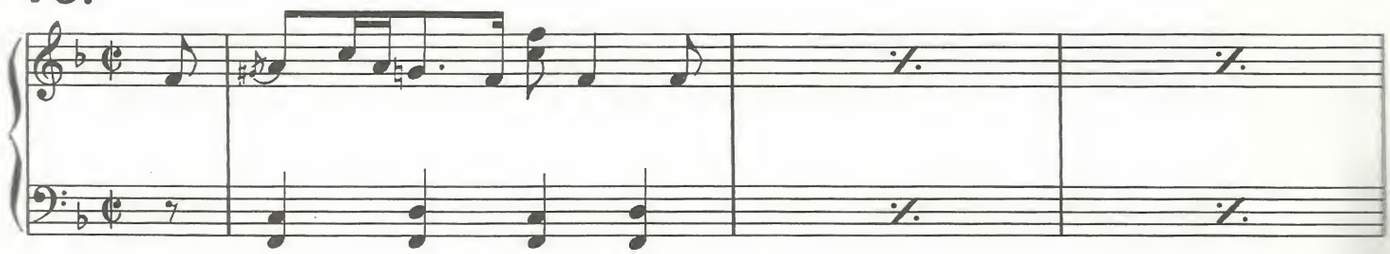

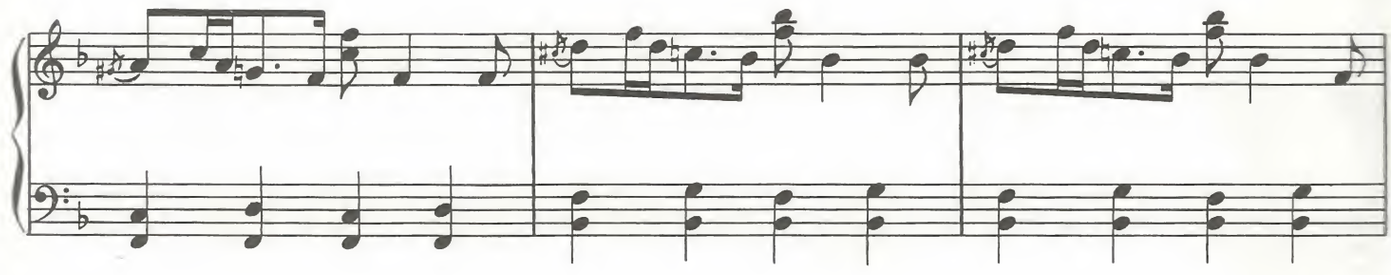

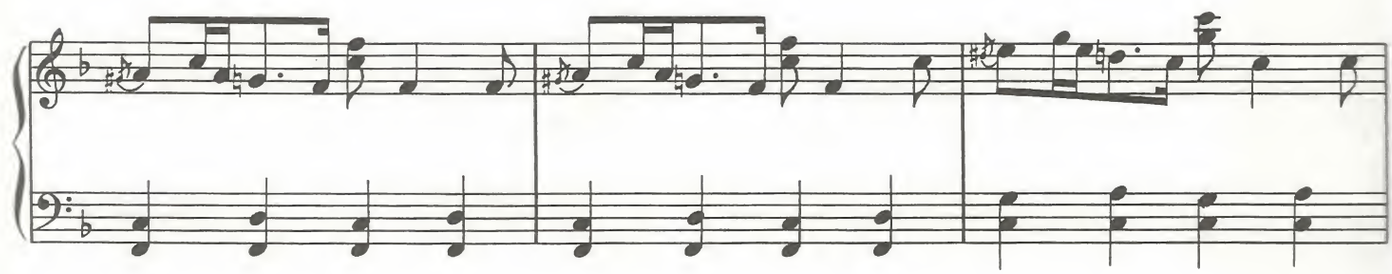

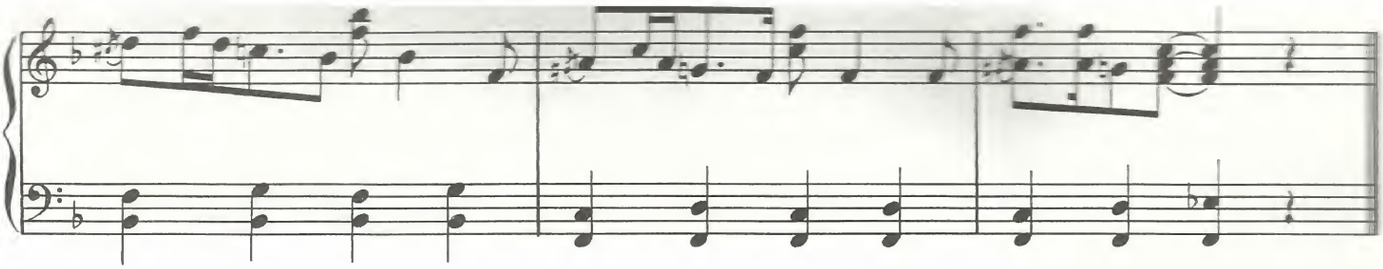

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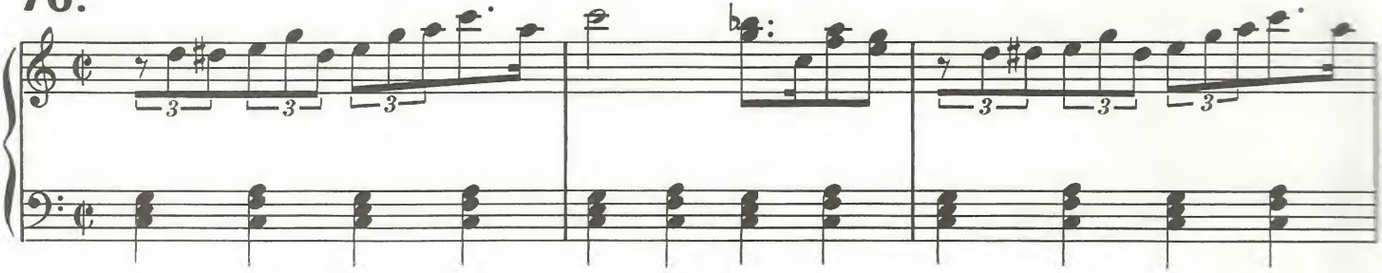

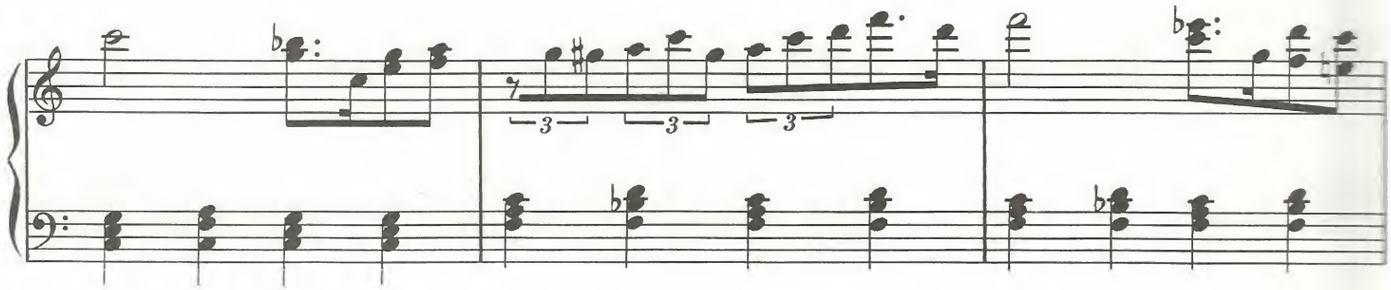

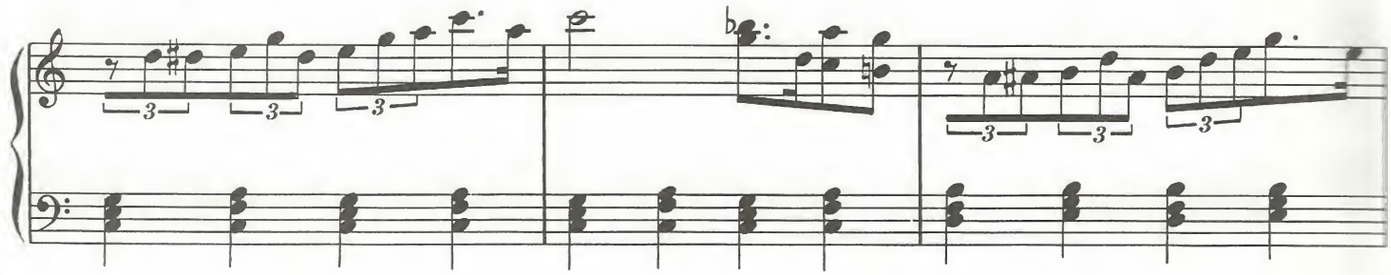

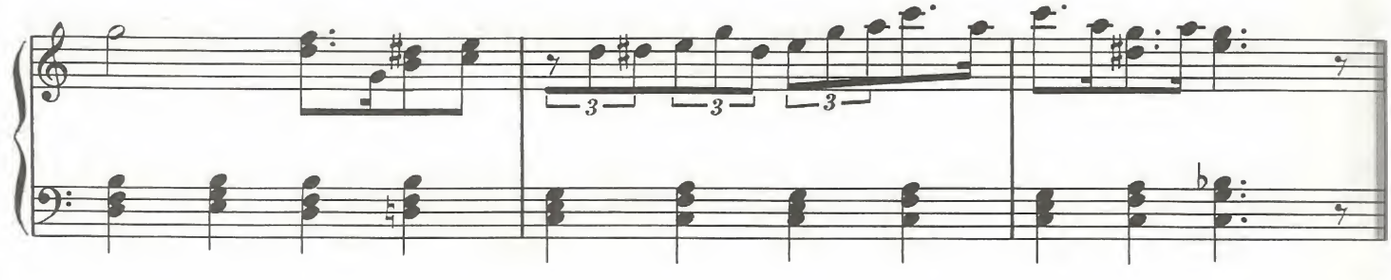

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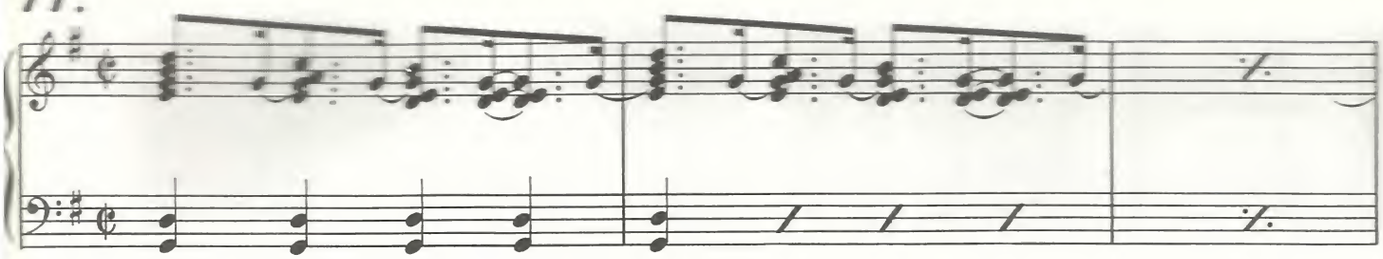

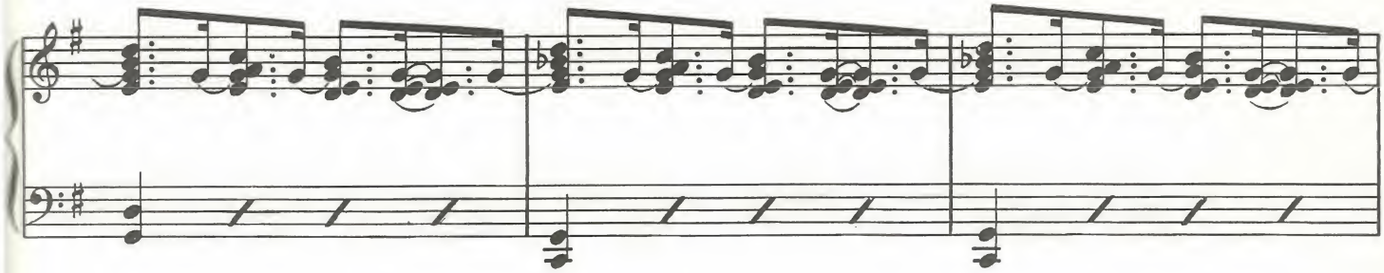

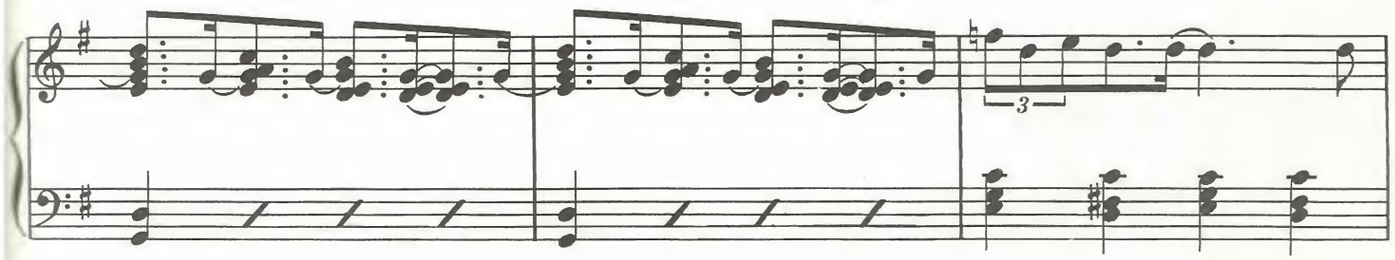

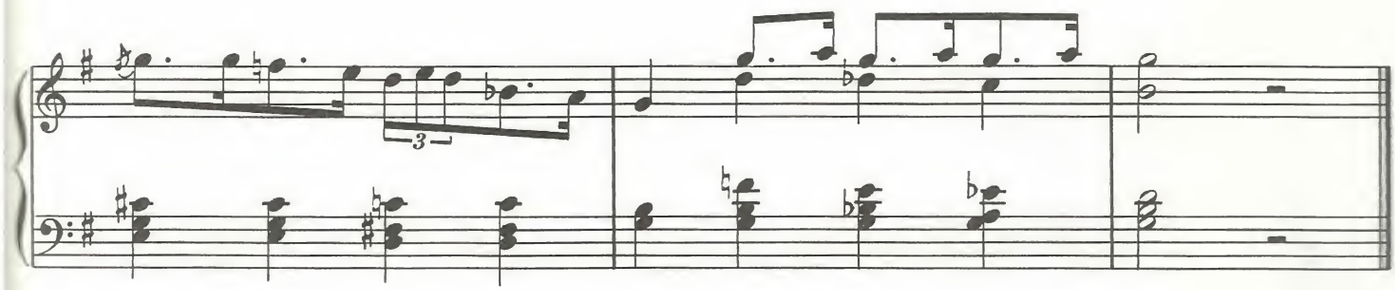

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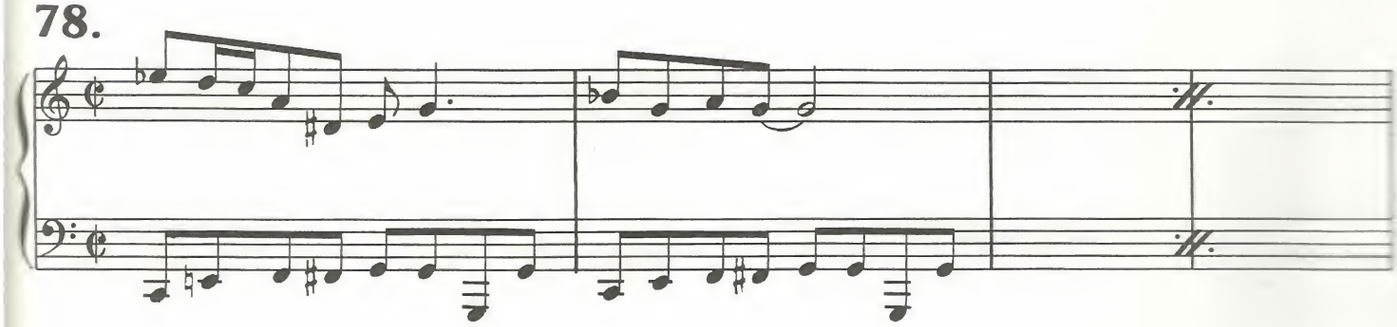

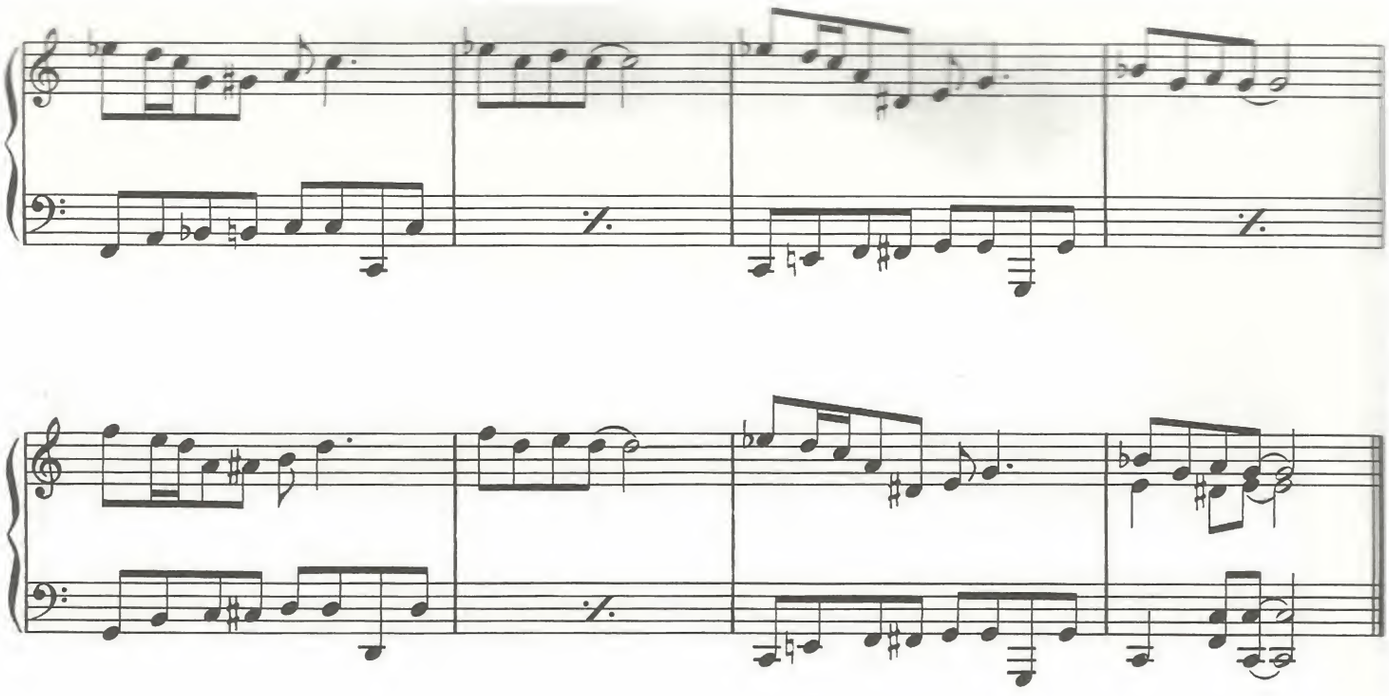

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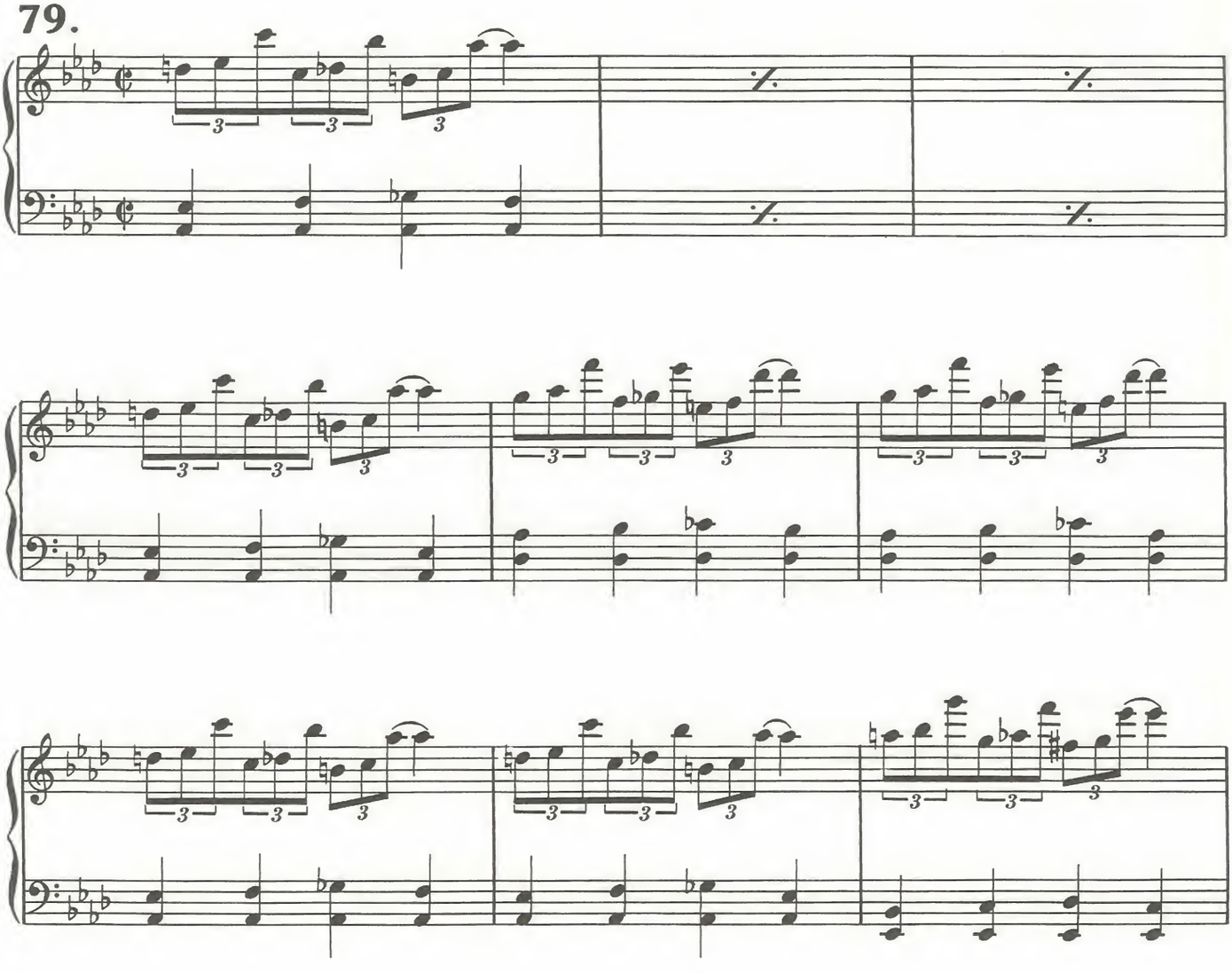
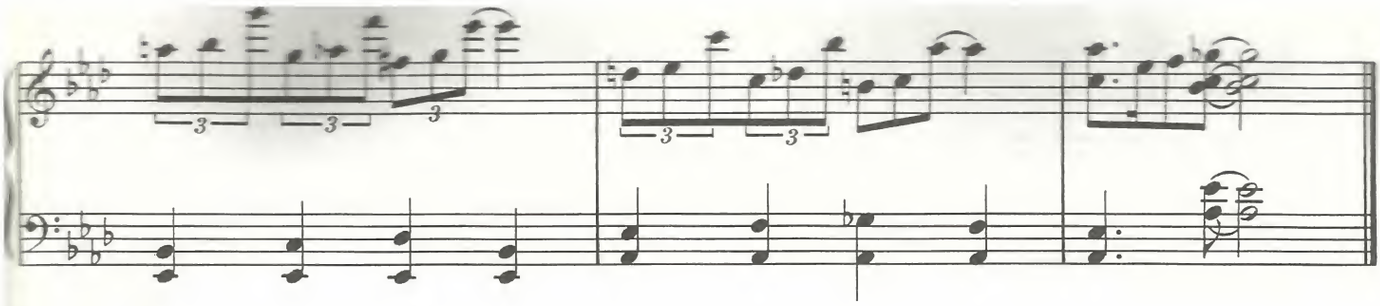
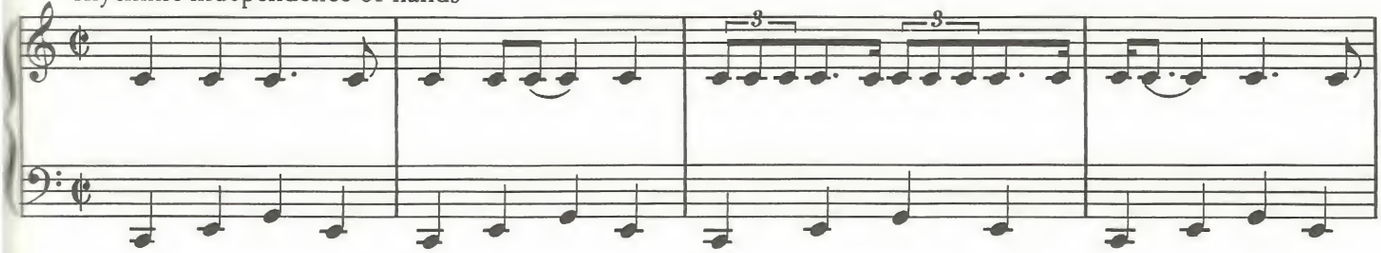
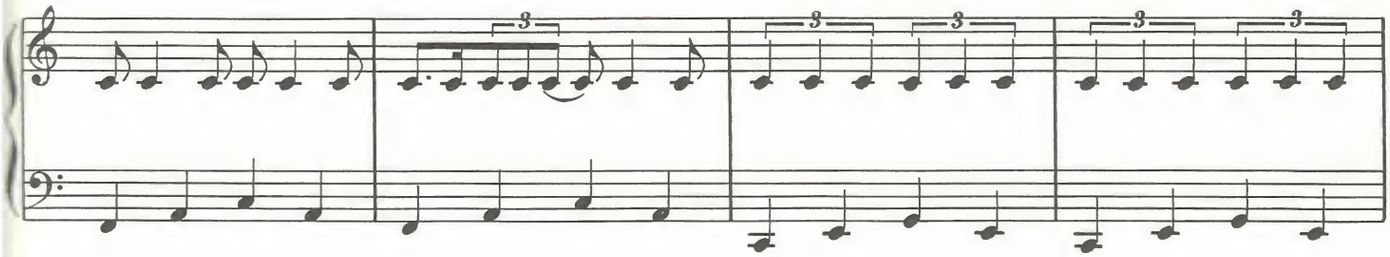
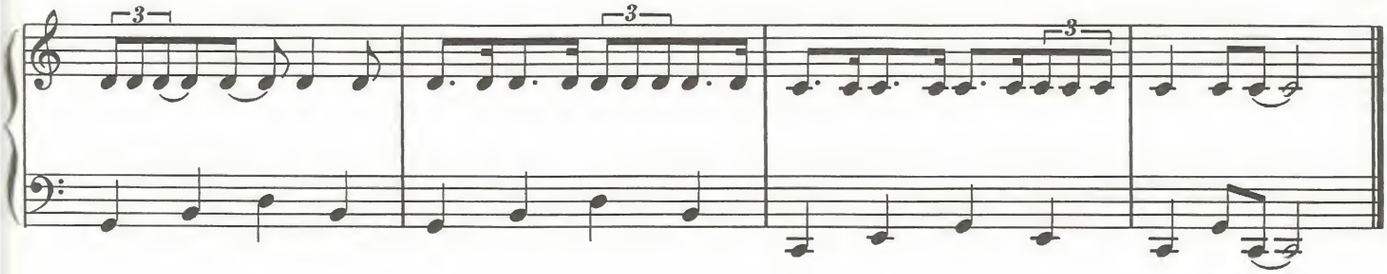




80.
rhythmic independence of hands







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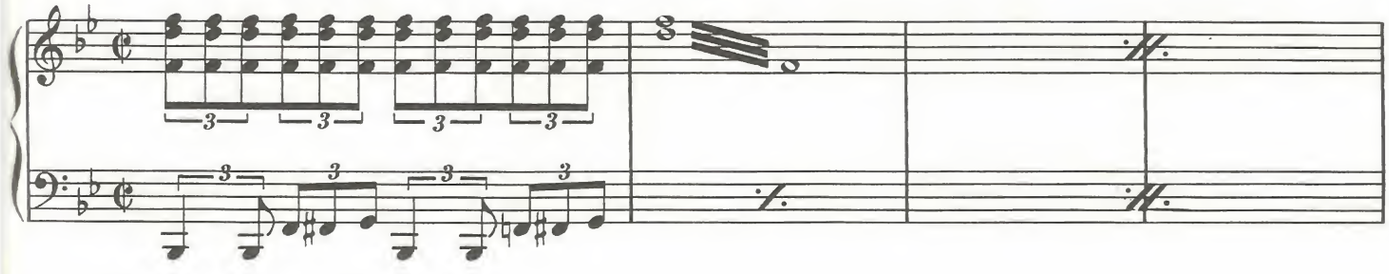

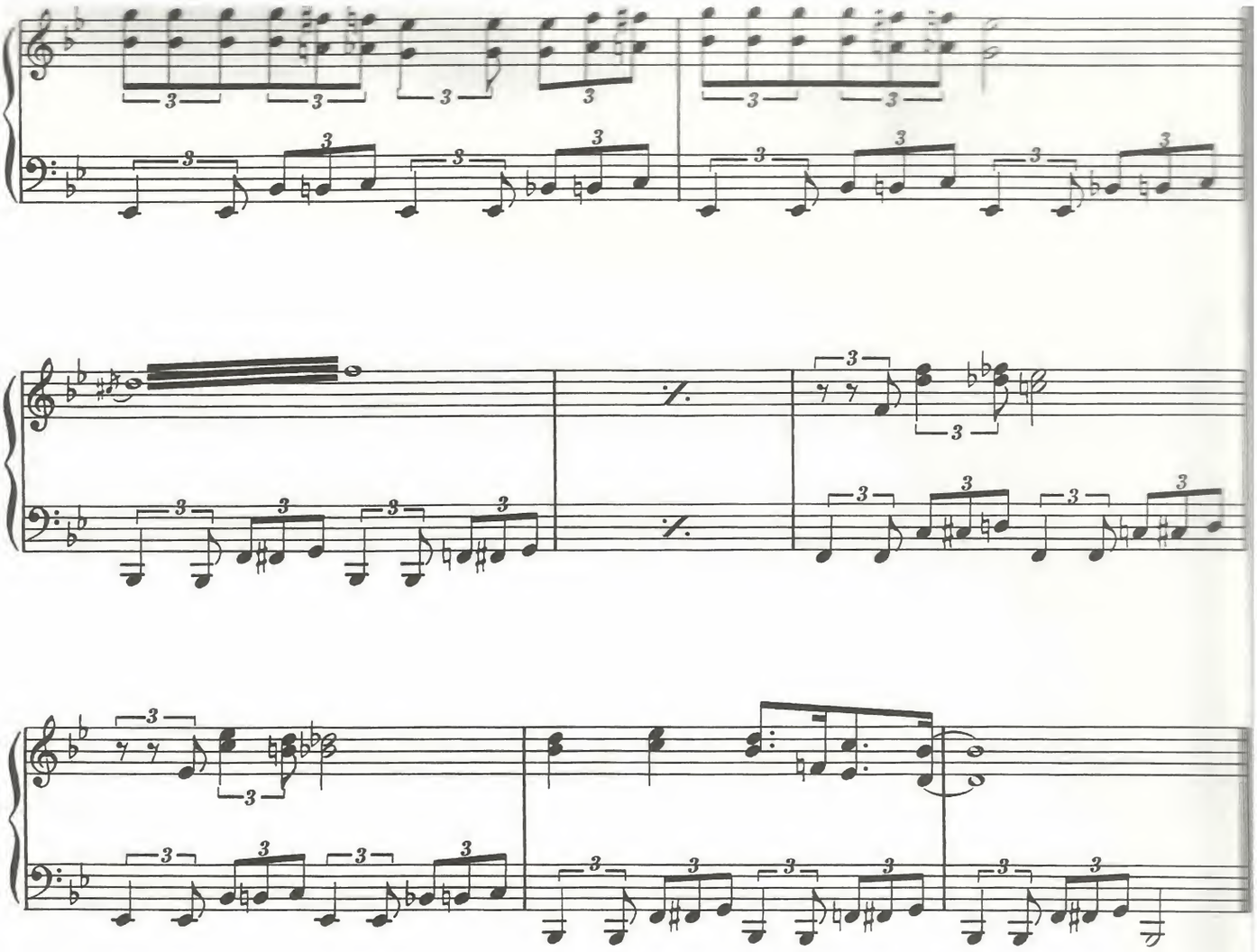

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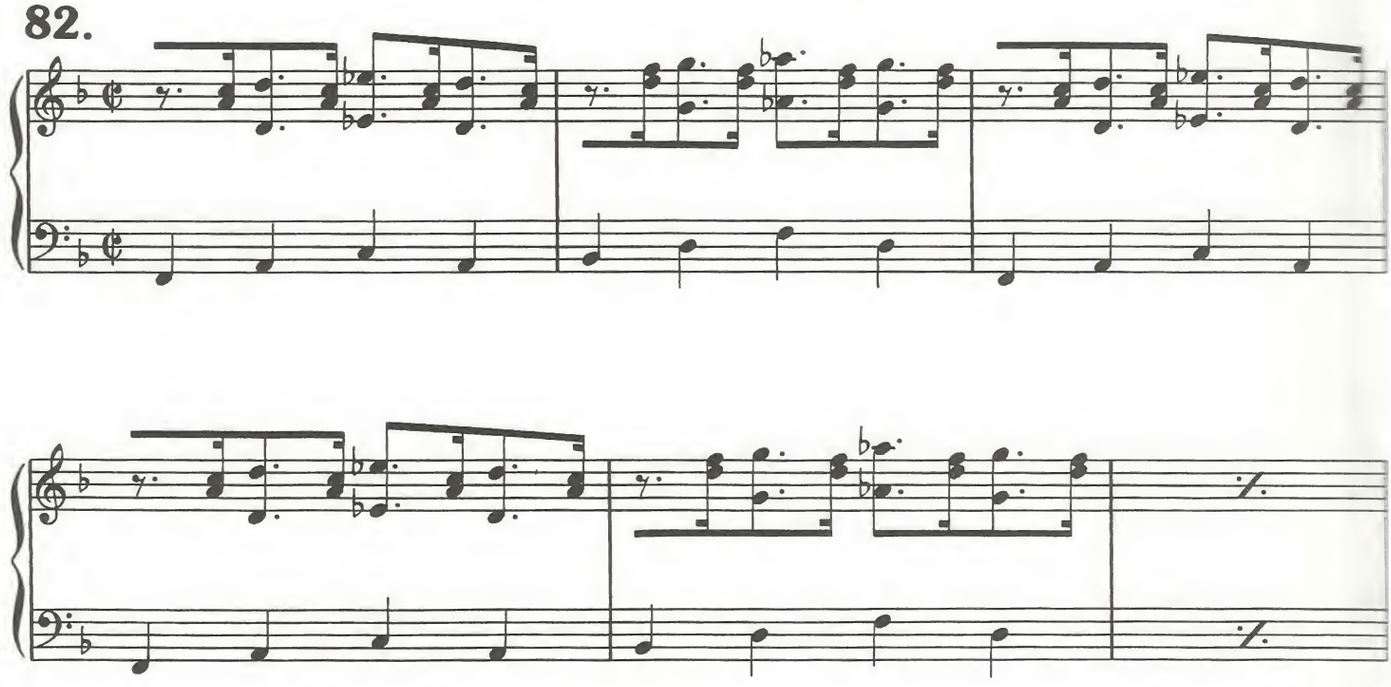

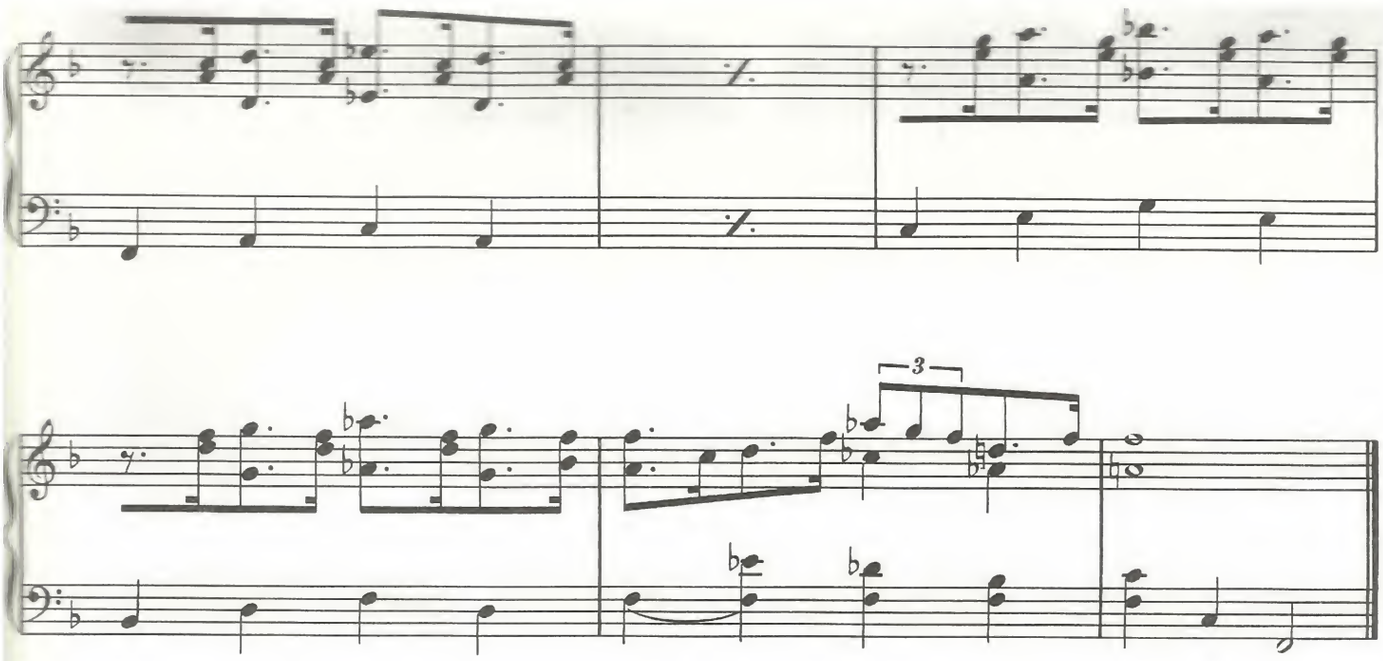

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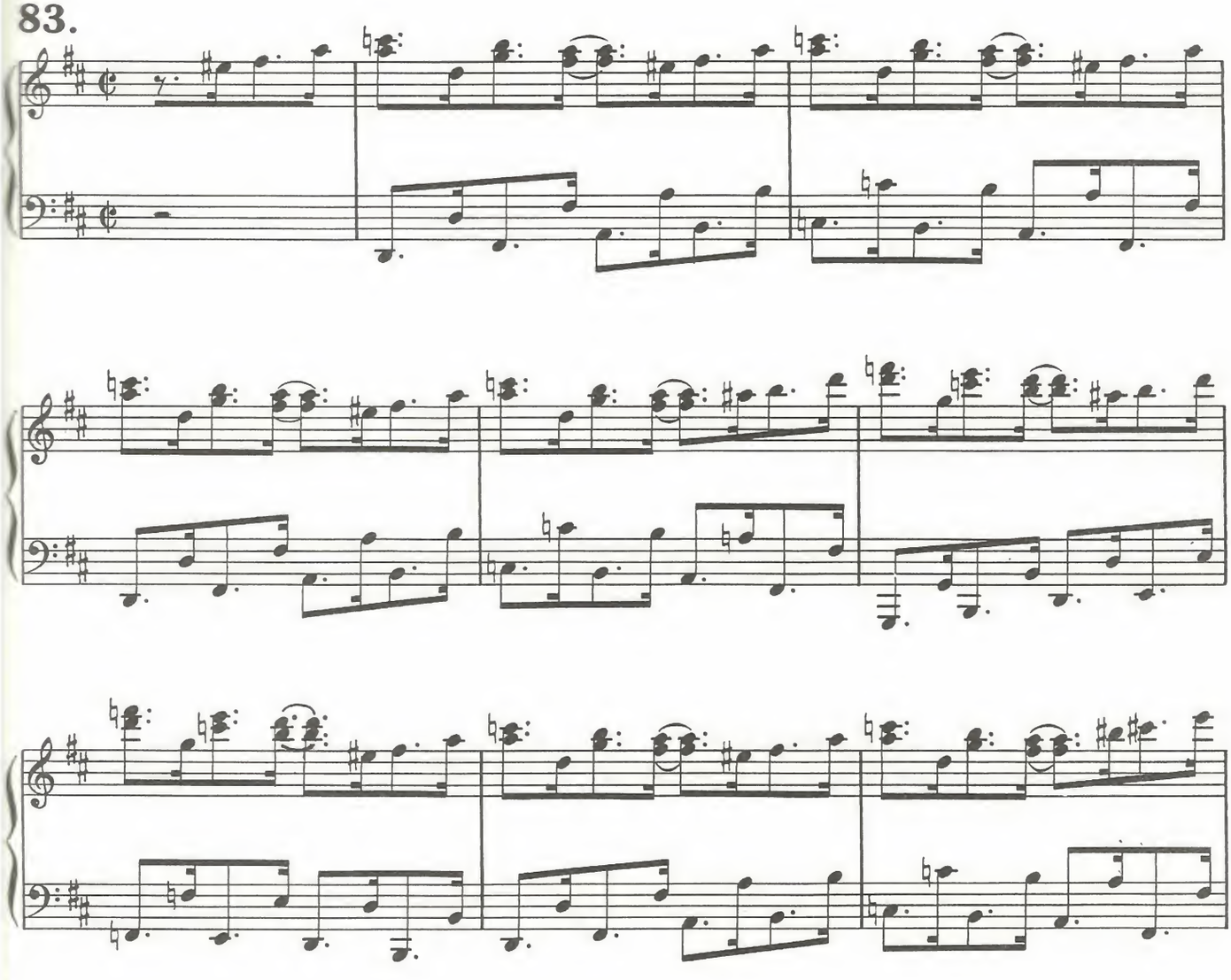

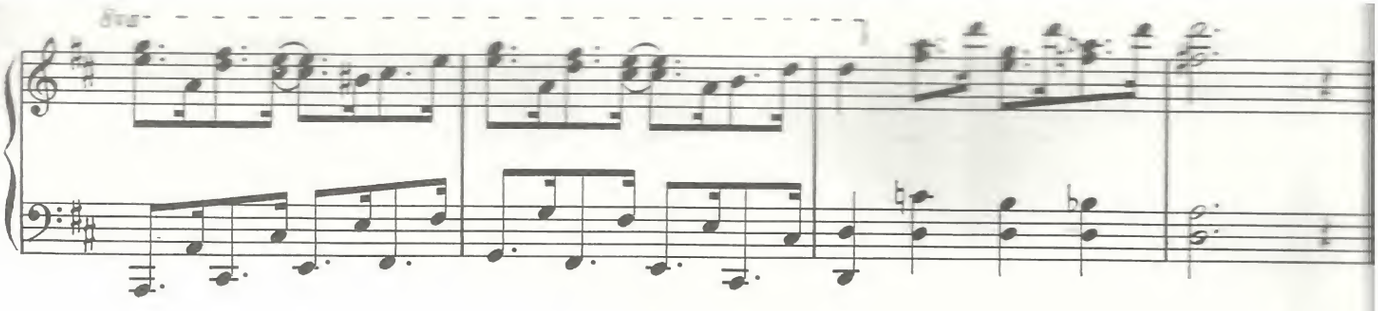

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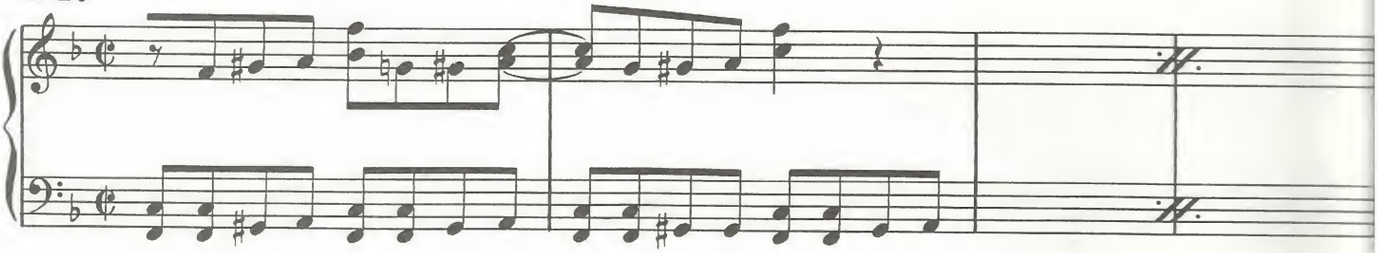

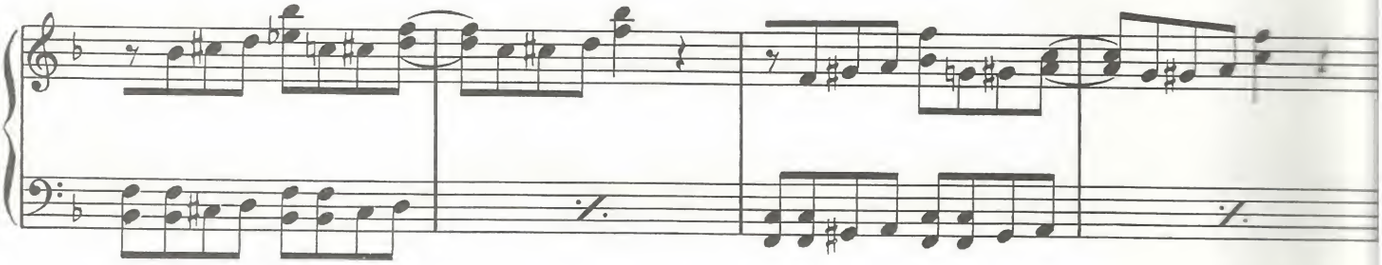

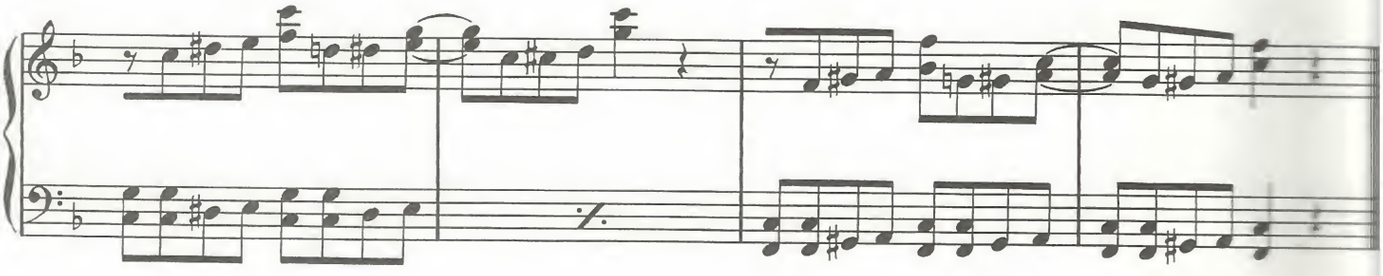

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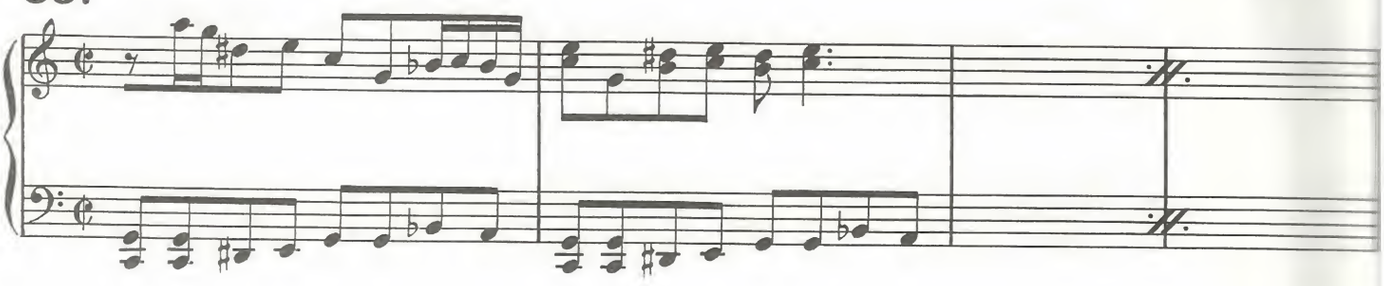

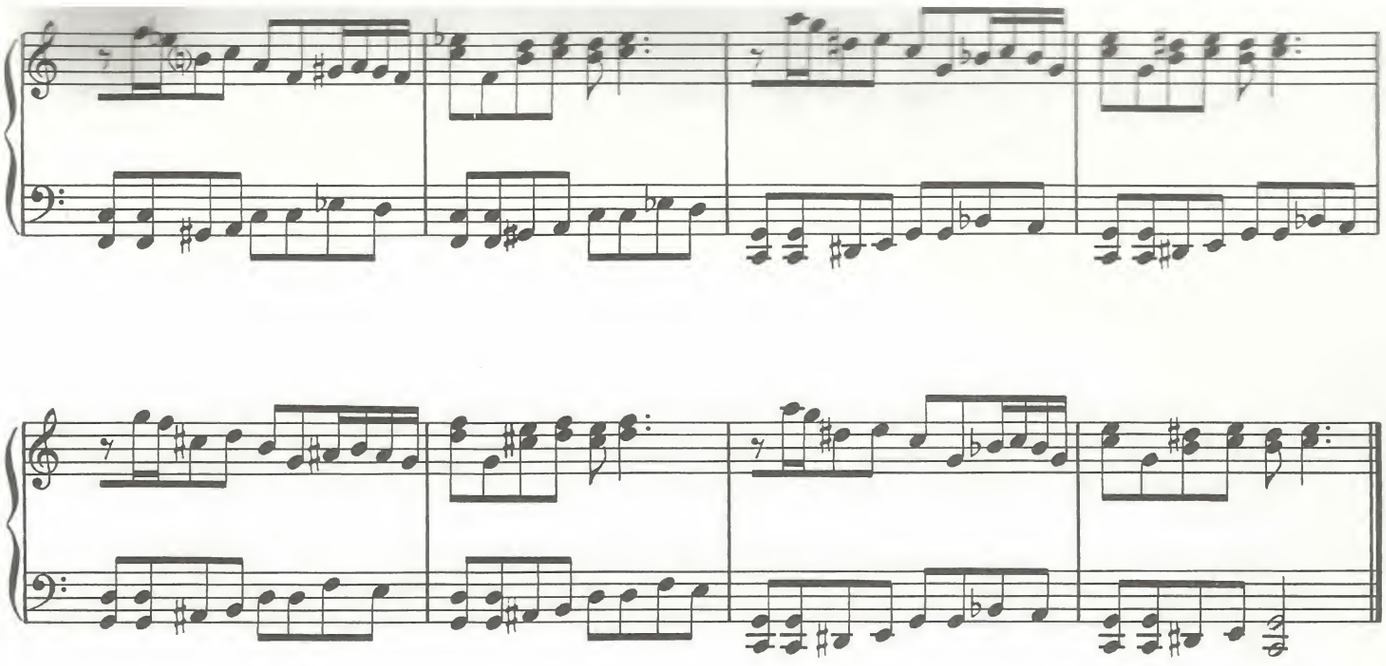

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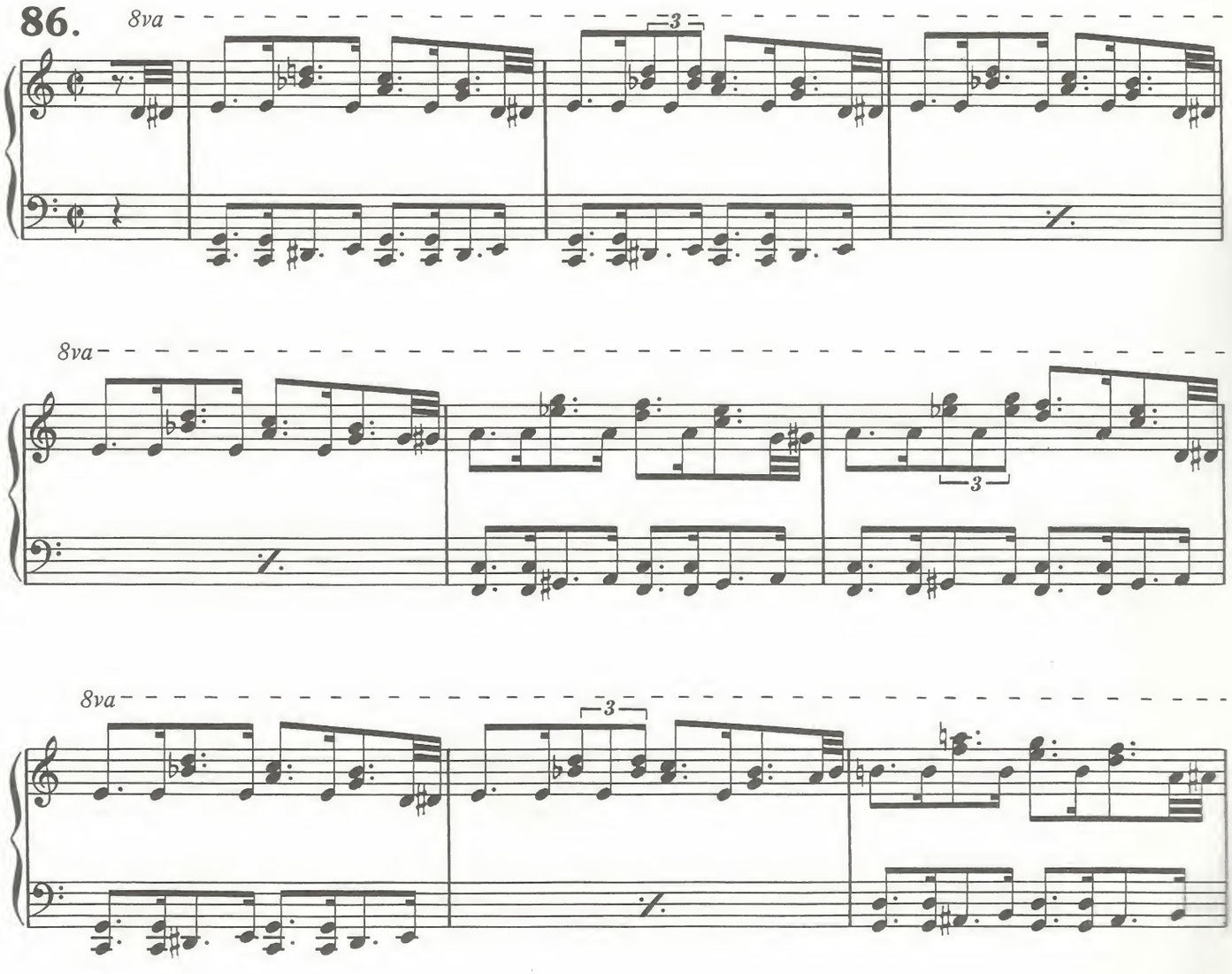

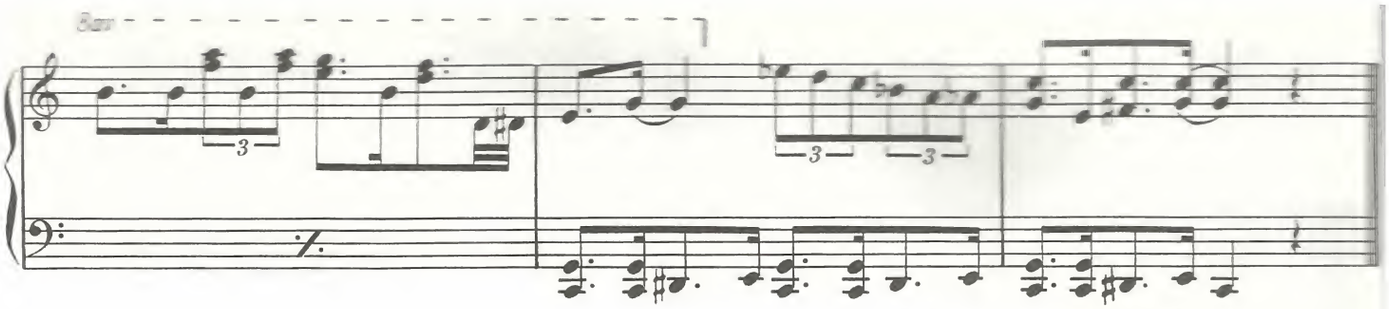

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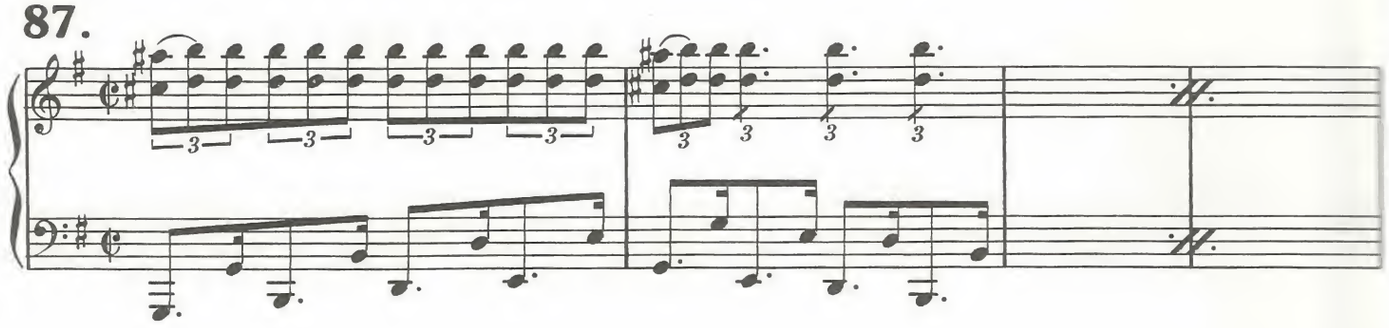

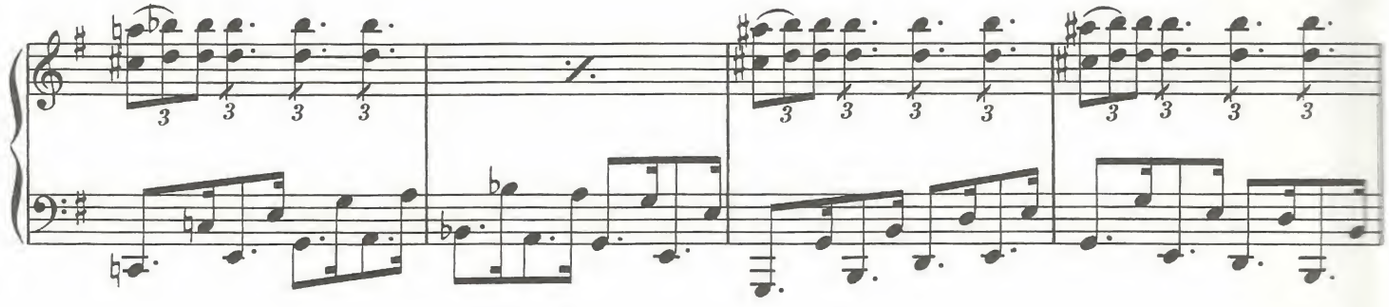

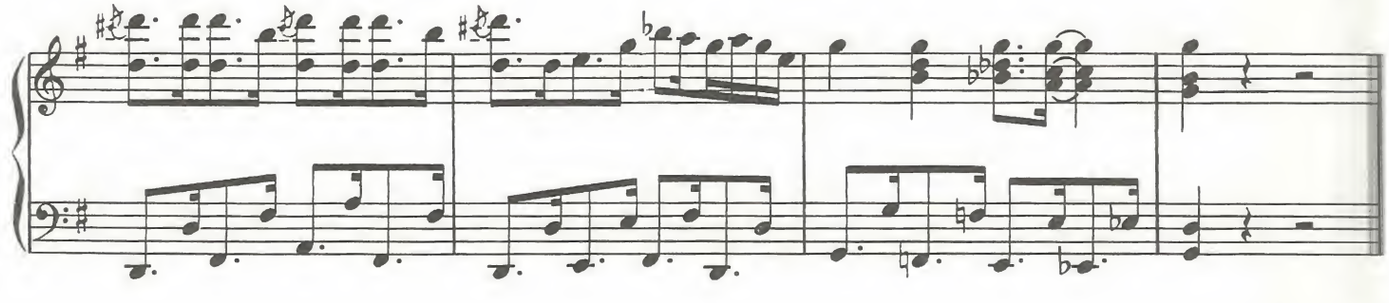

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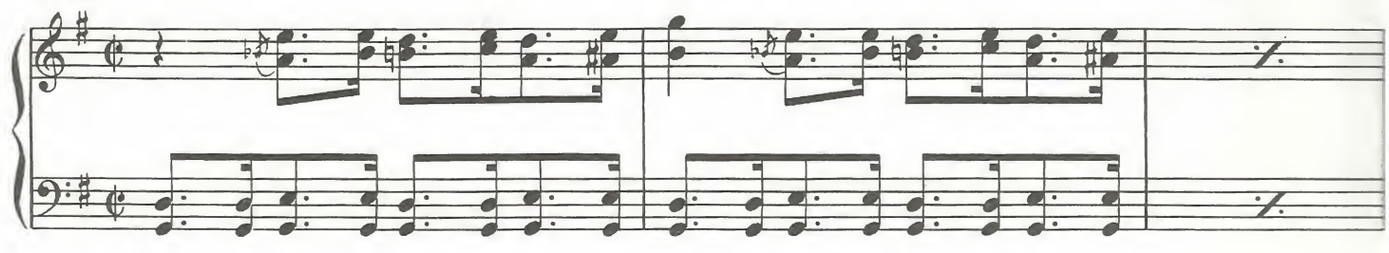

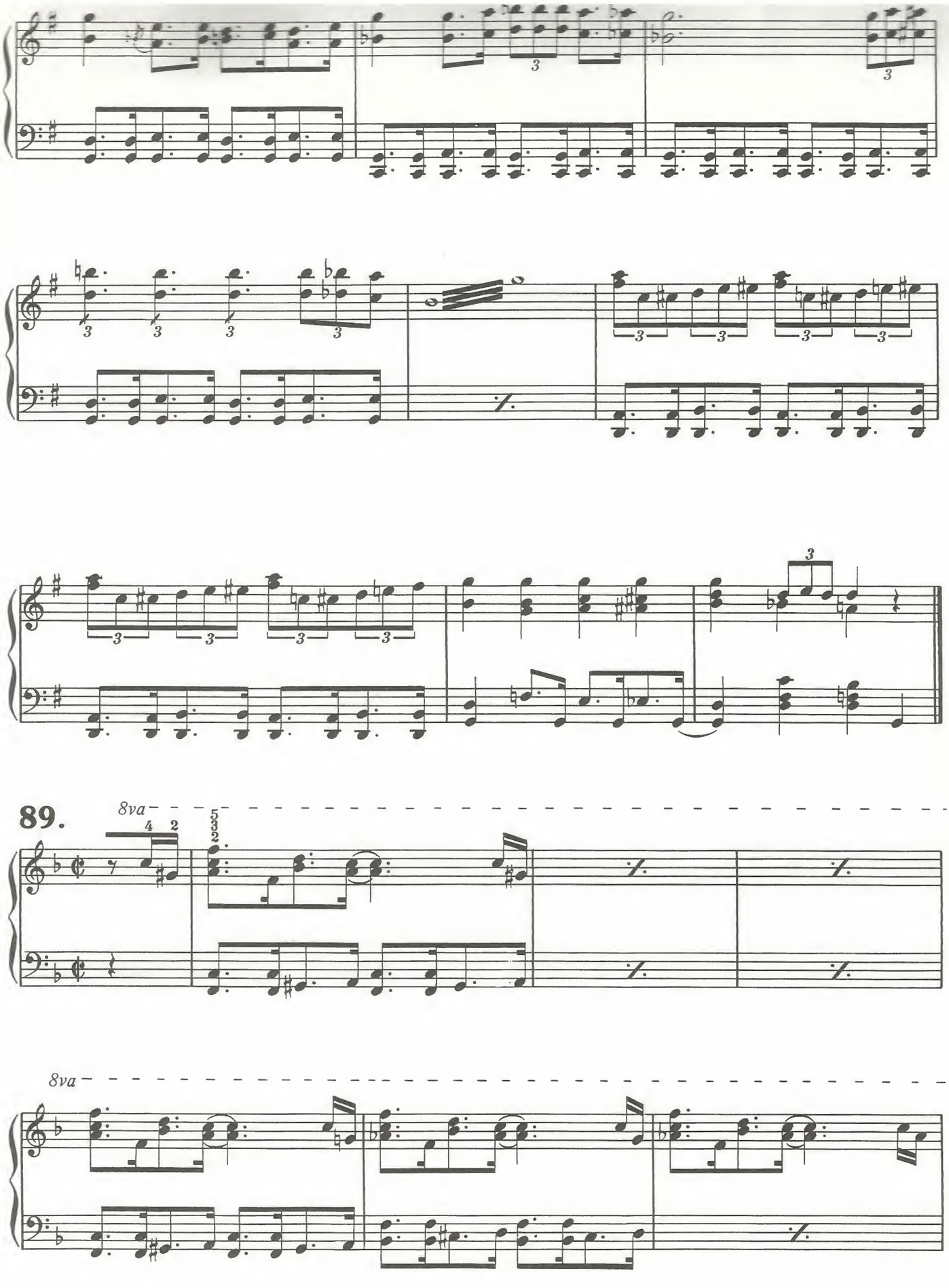
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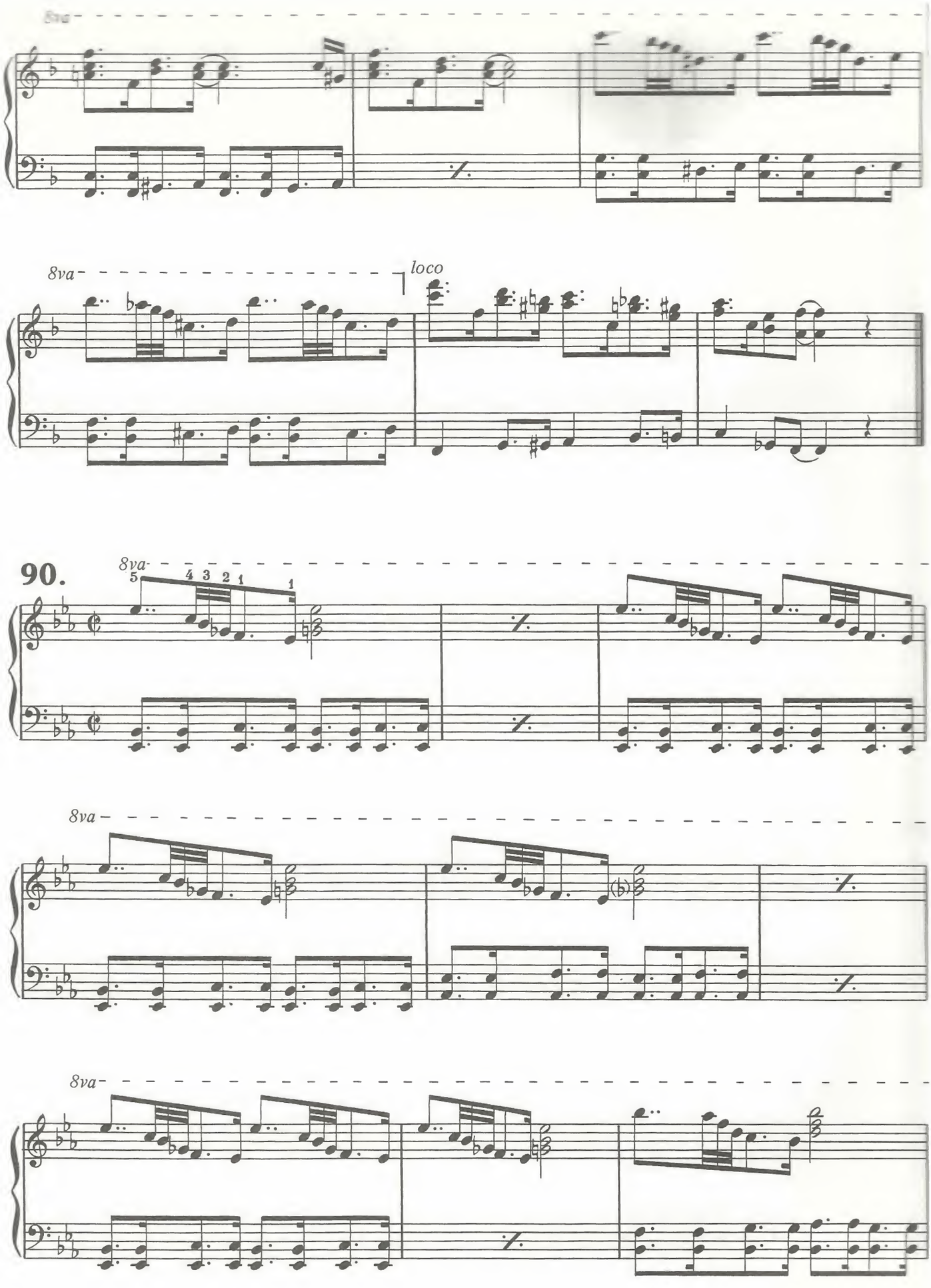
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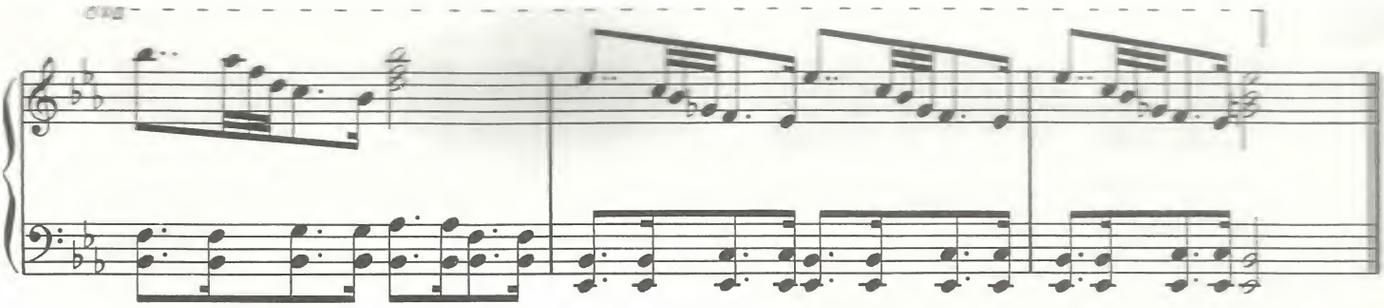

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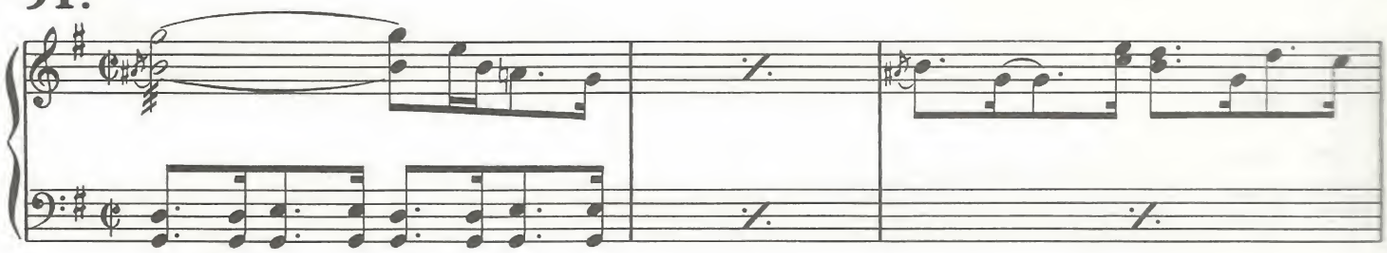

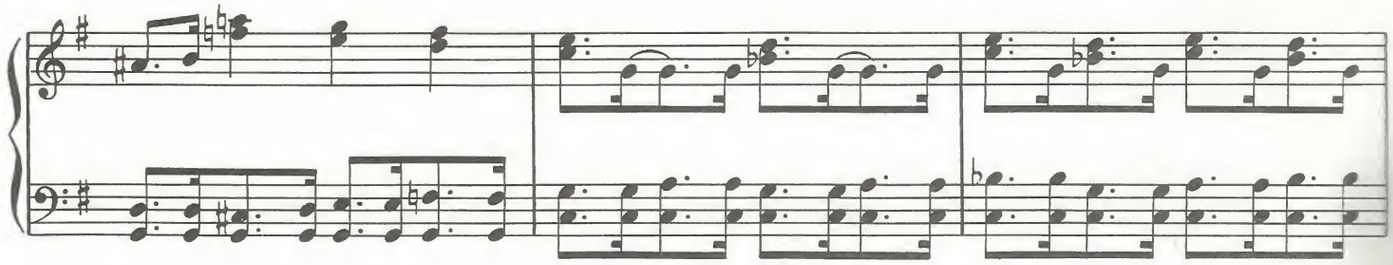

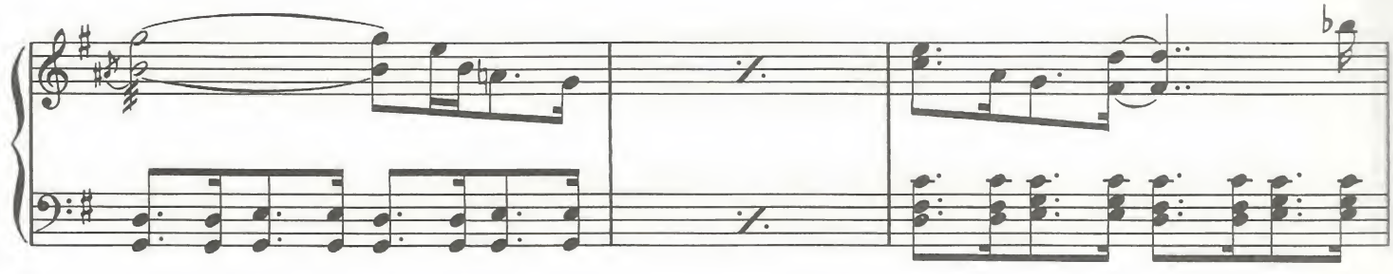

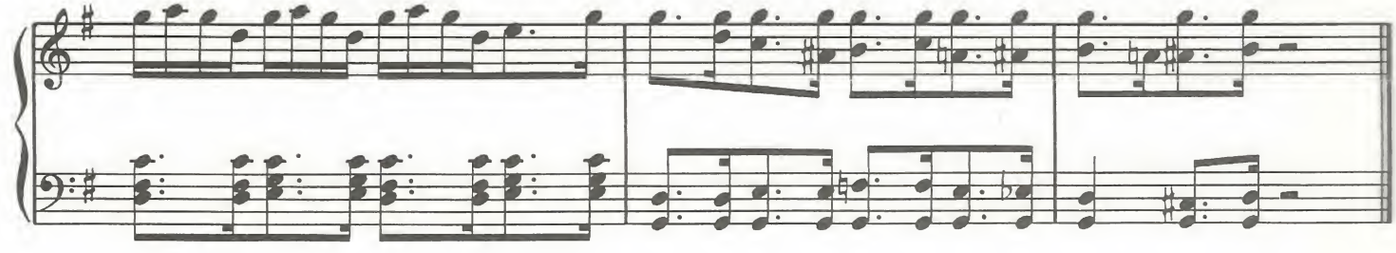

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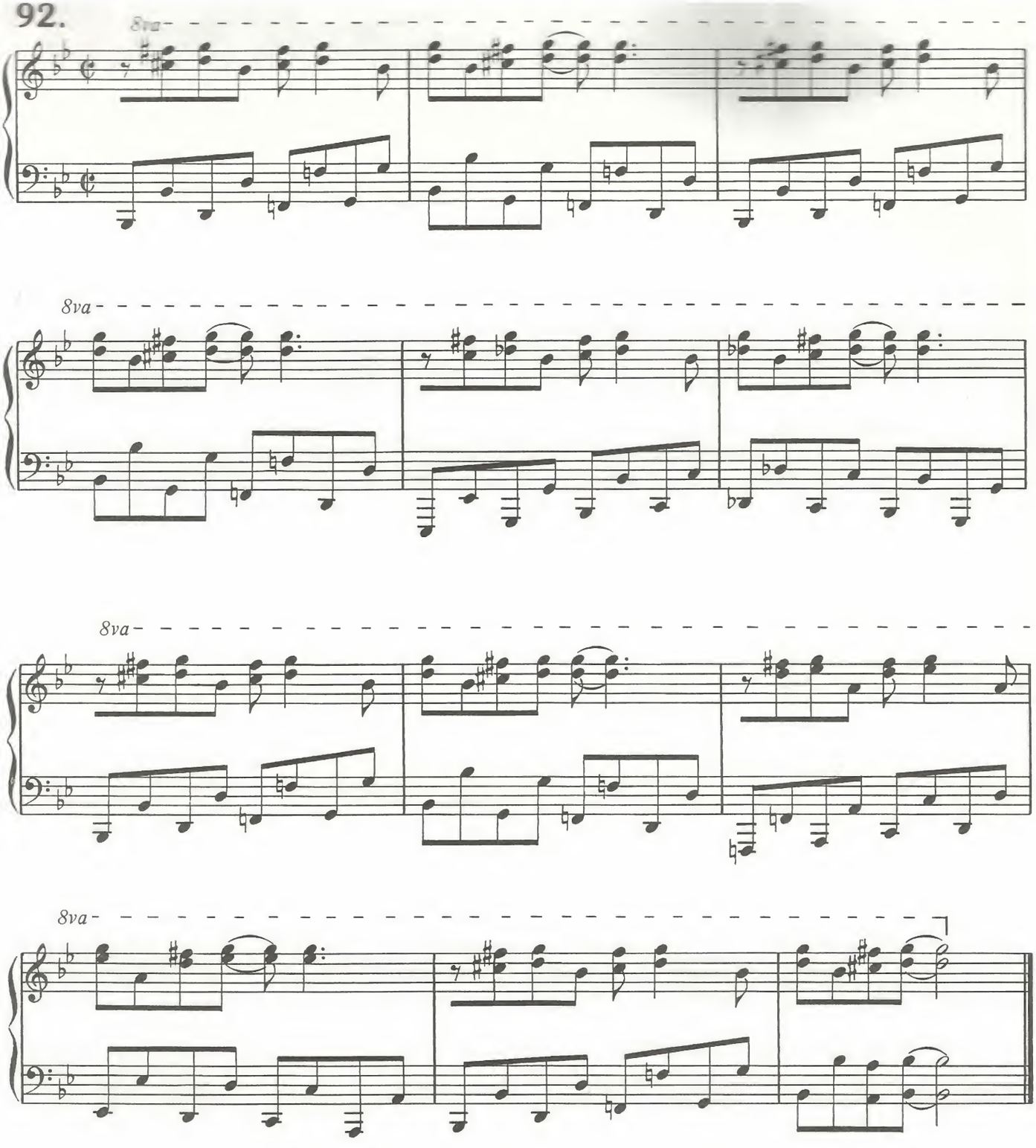

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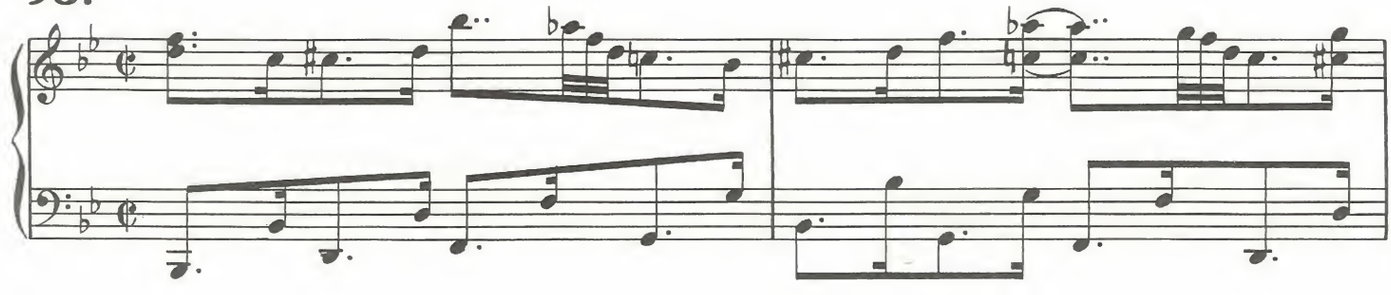

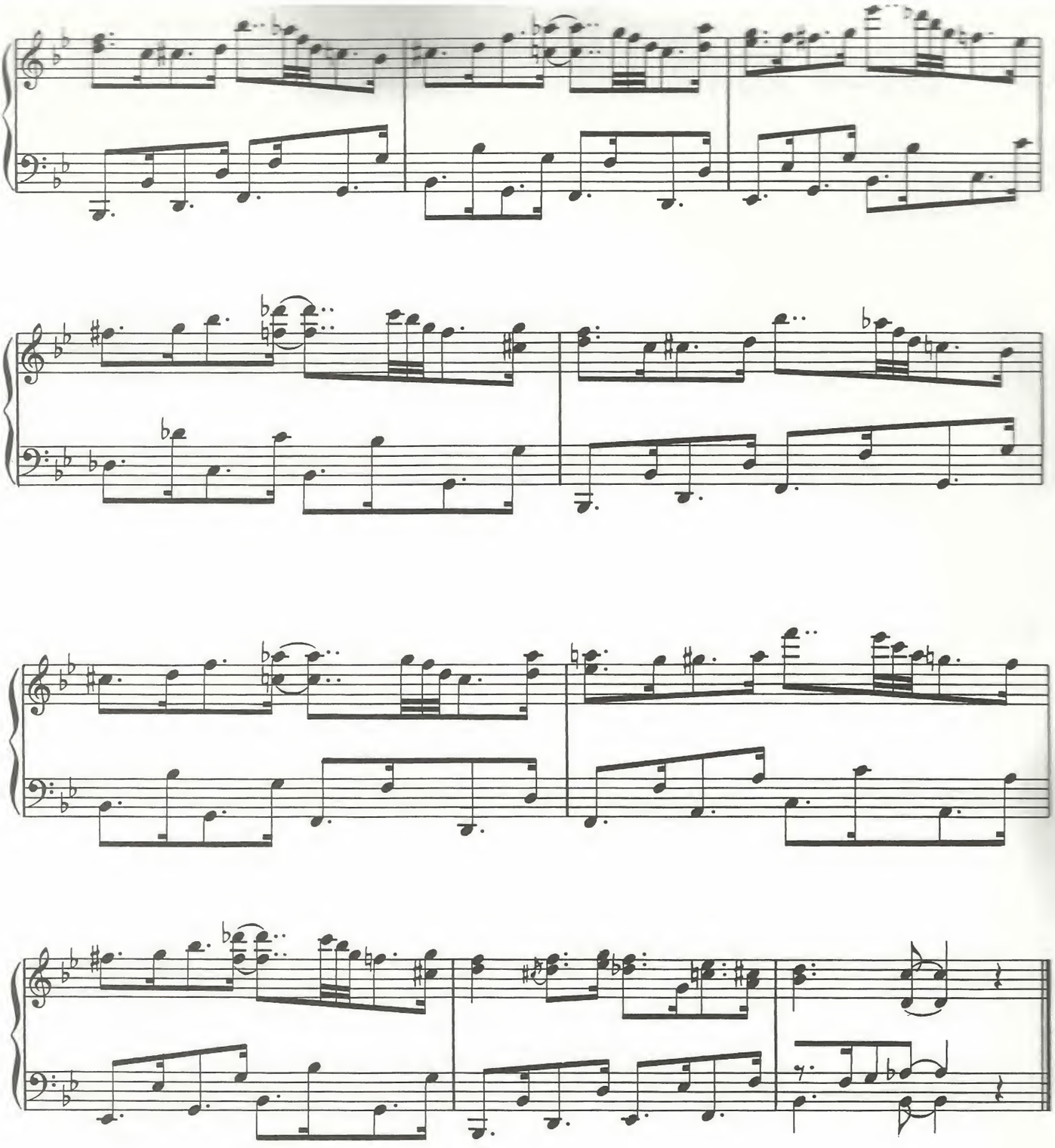

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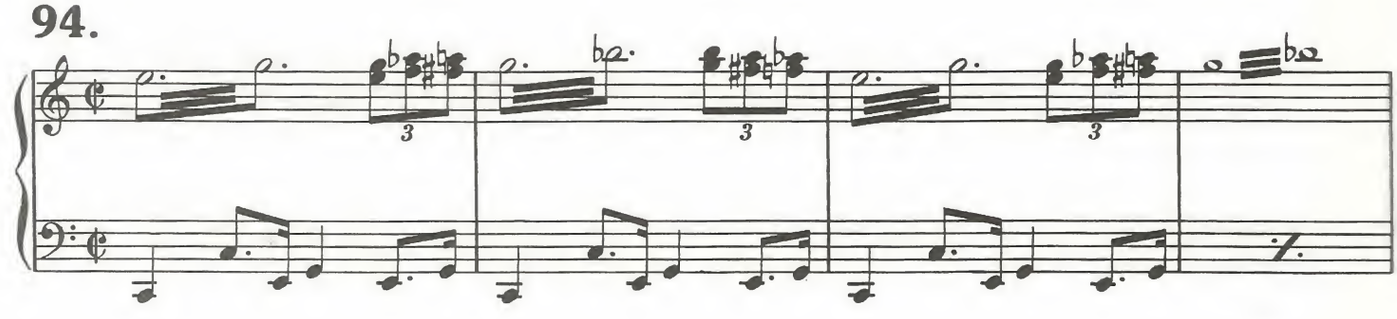

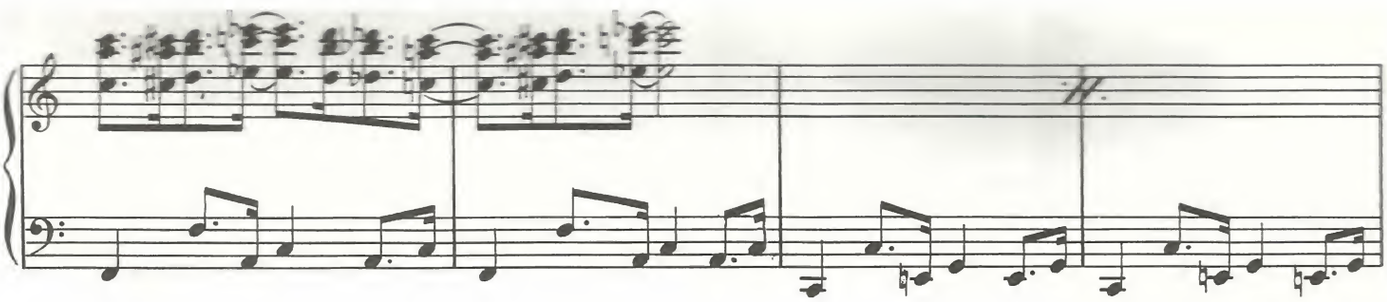

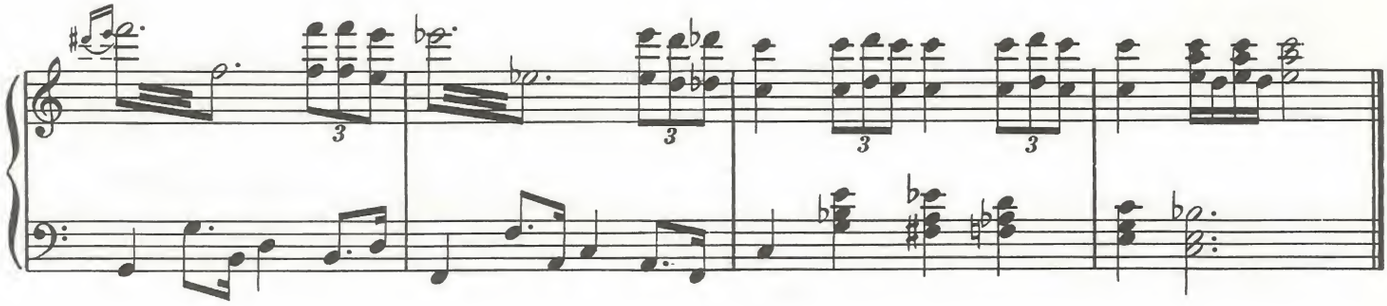

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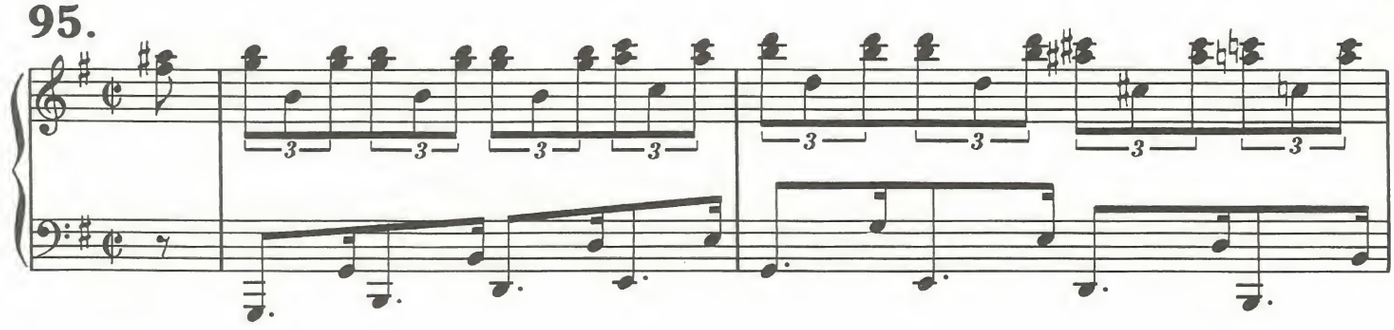

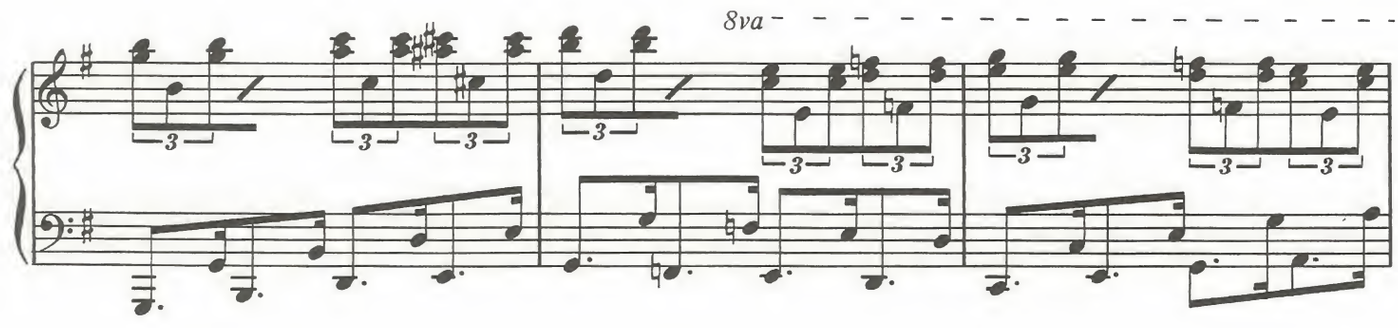

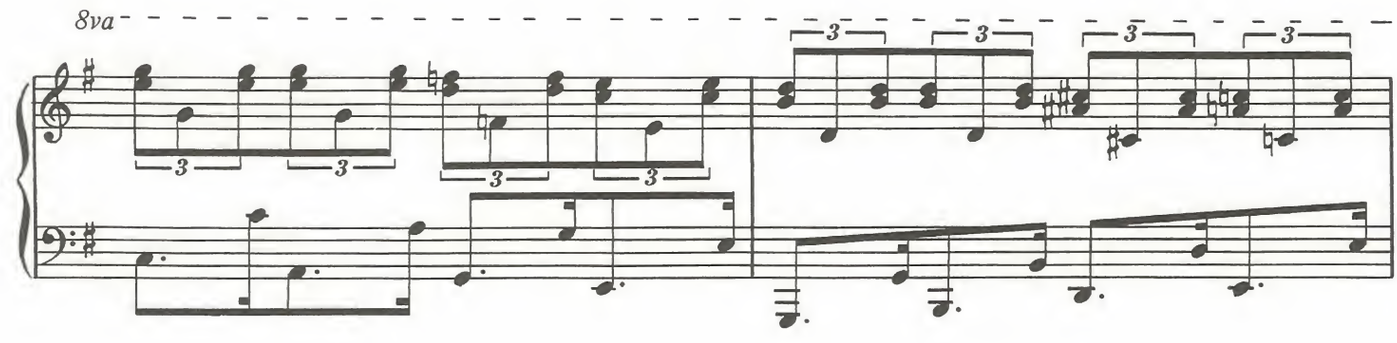

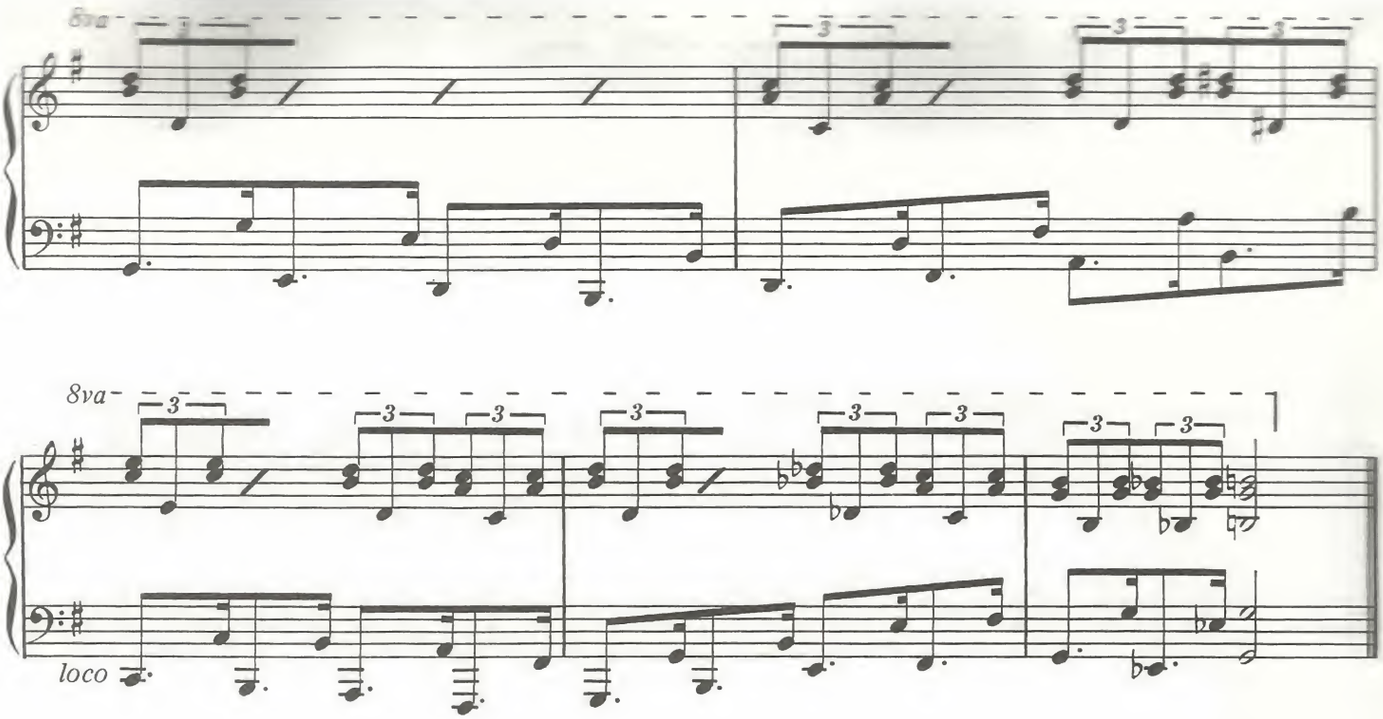

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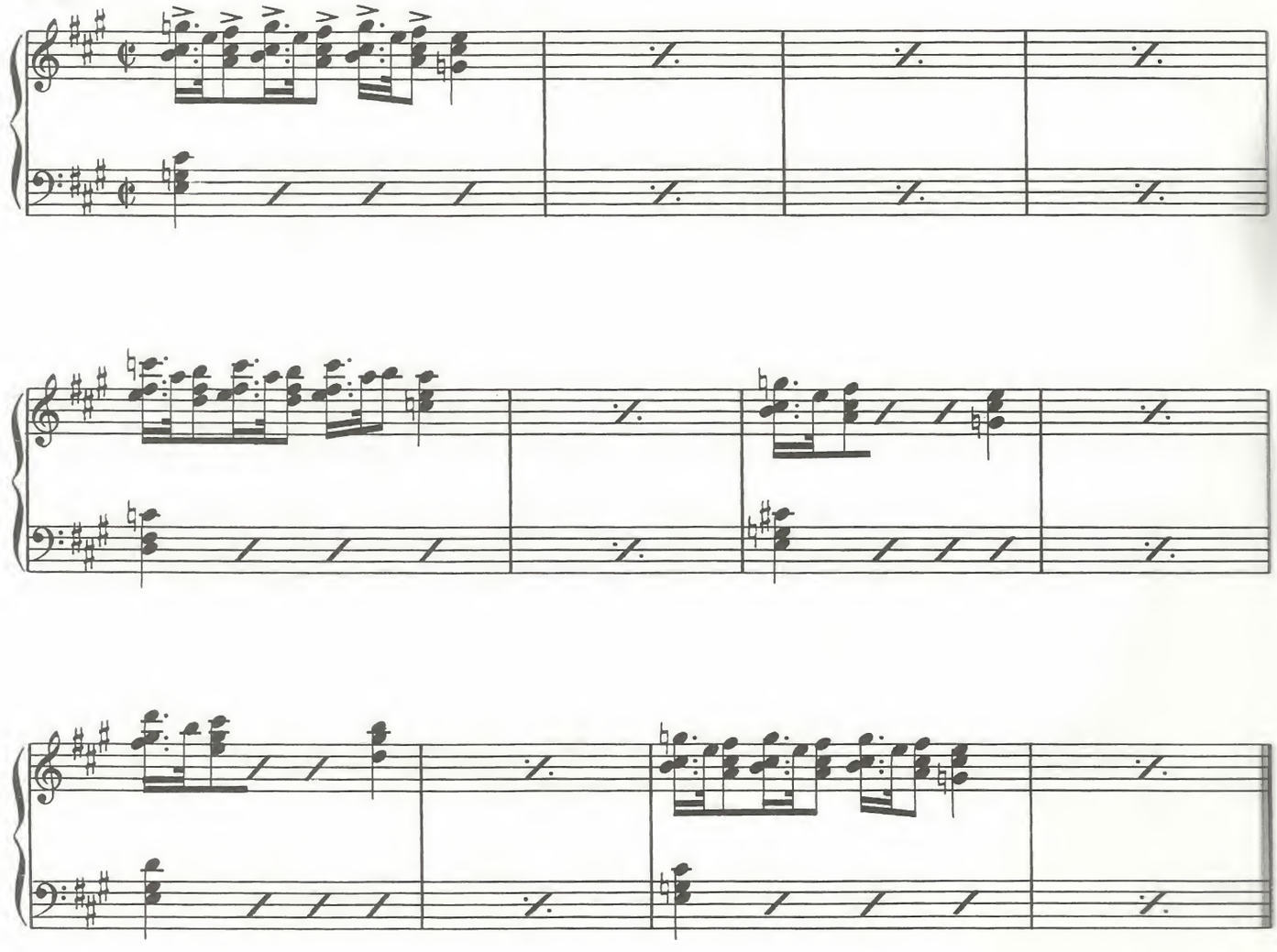

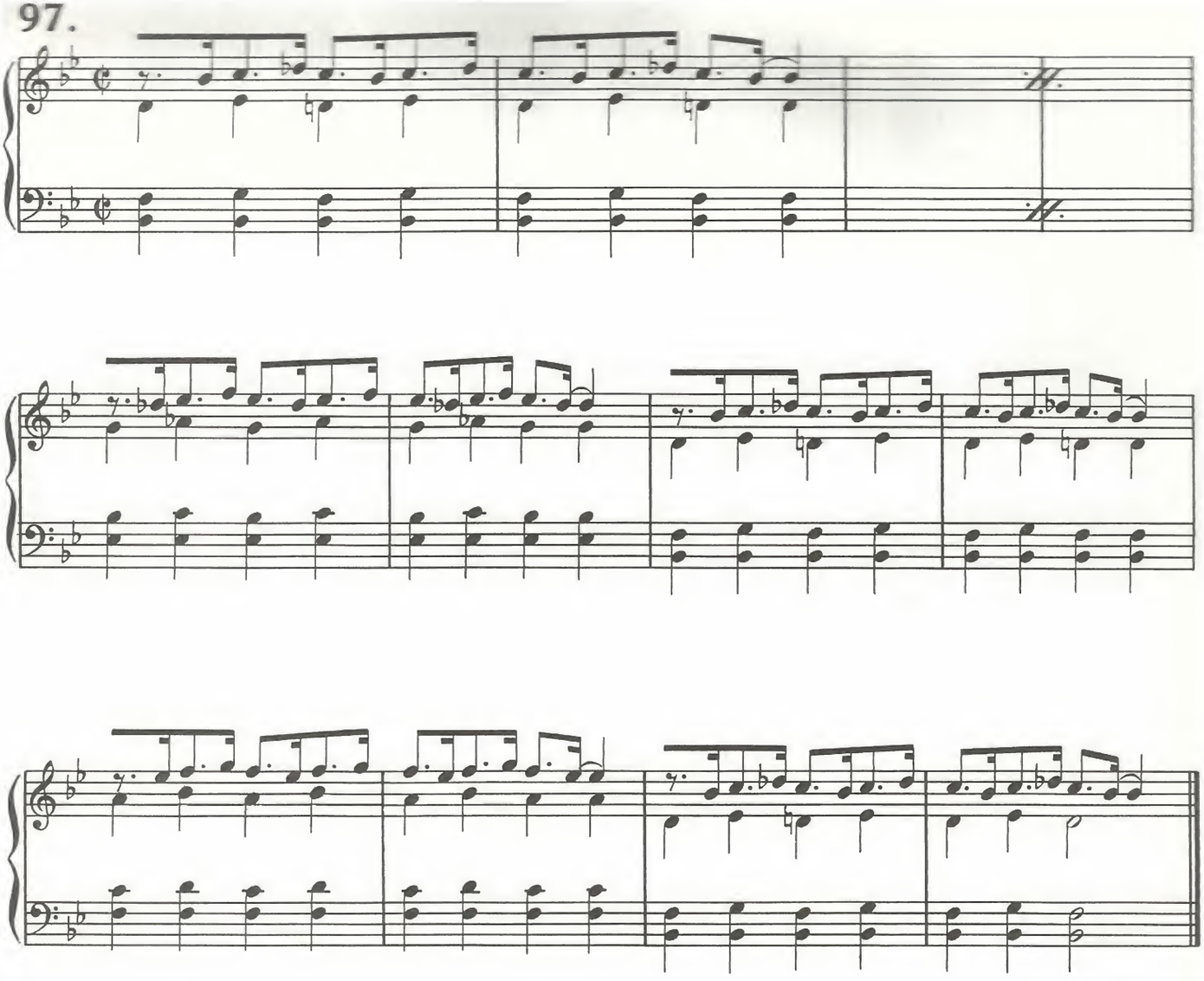
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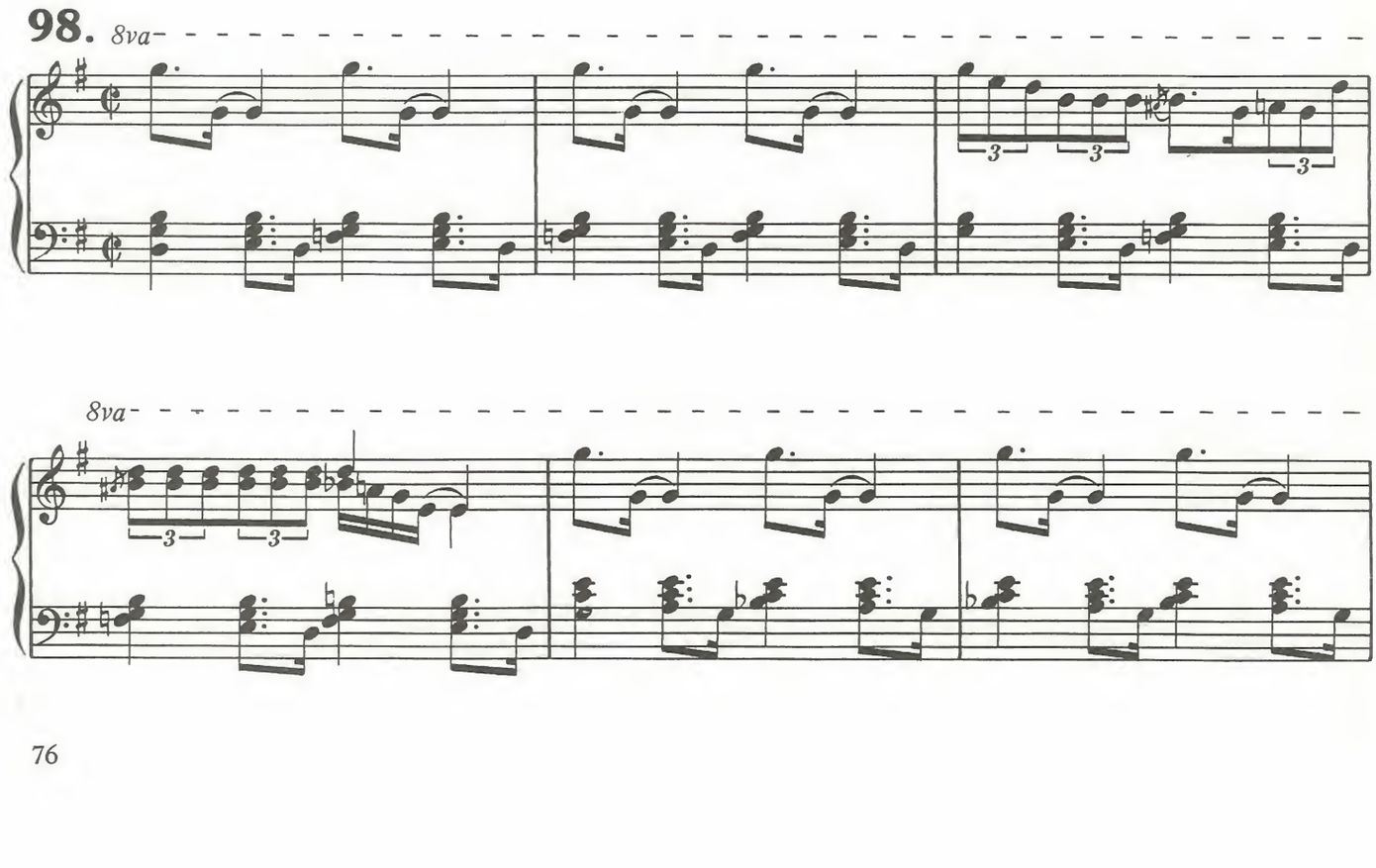
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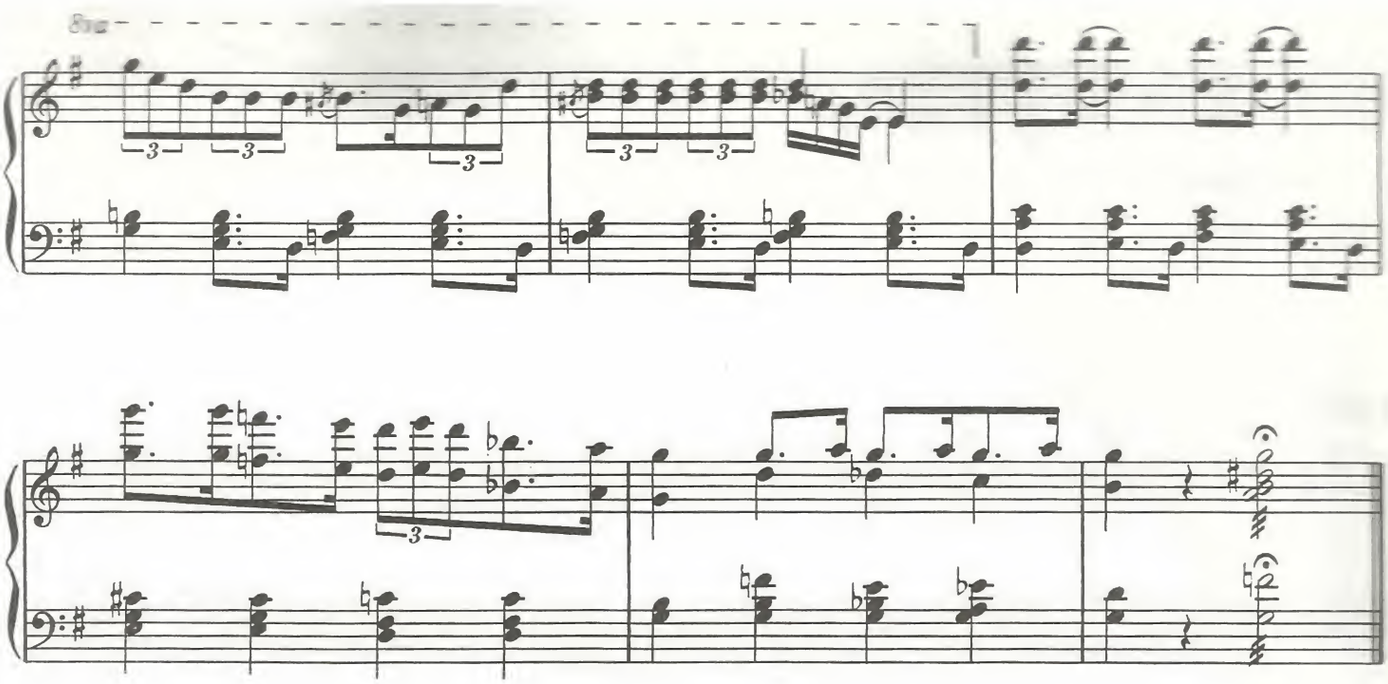

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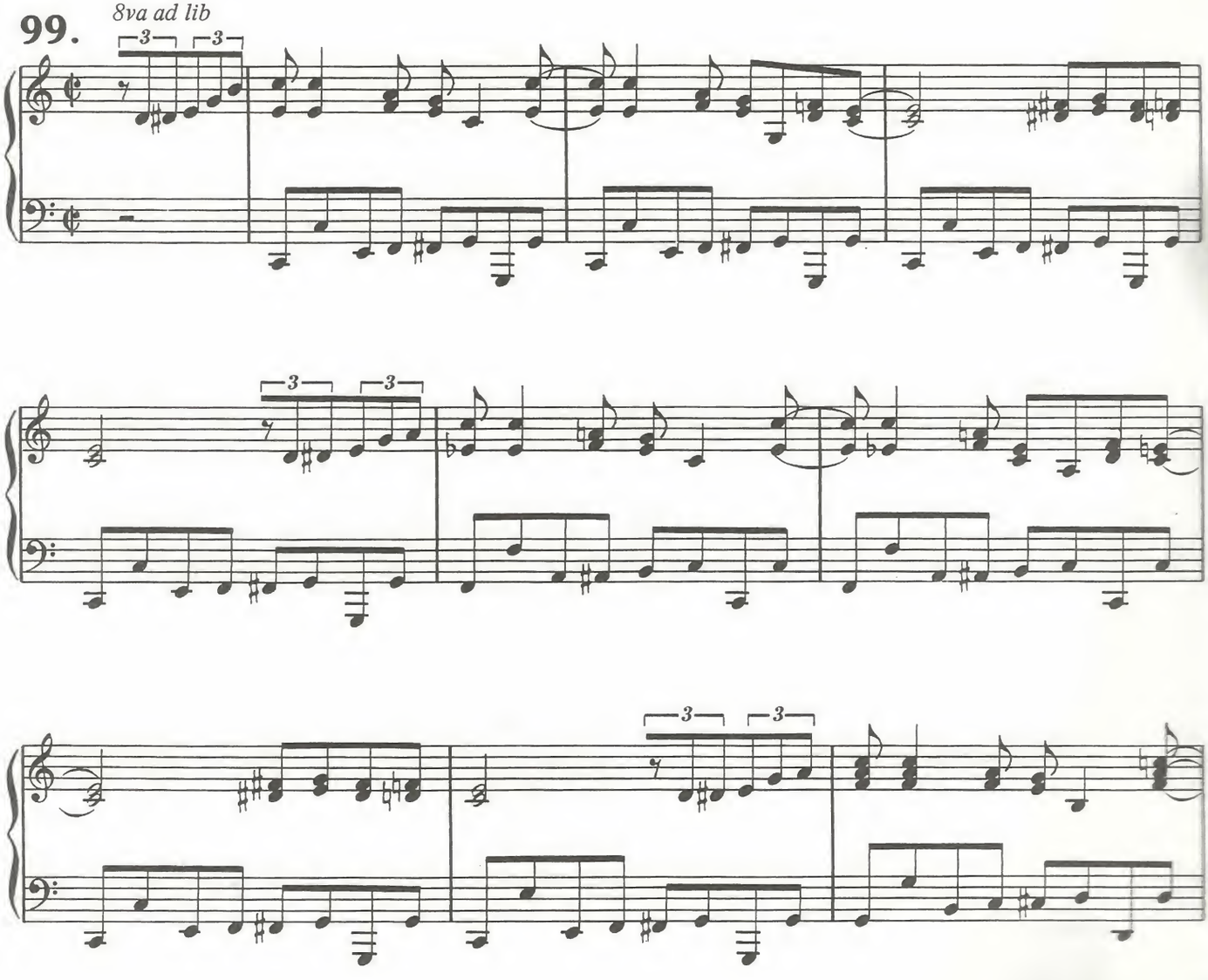

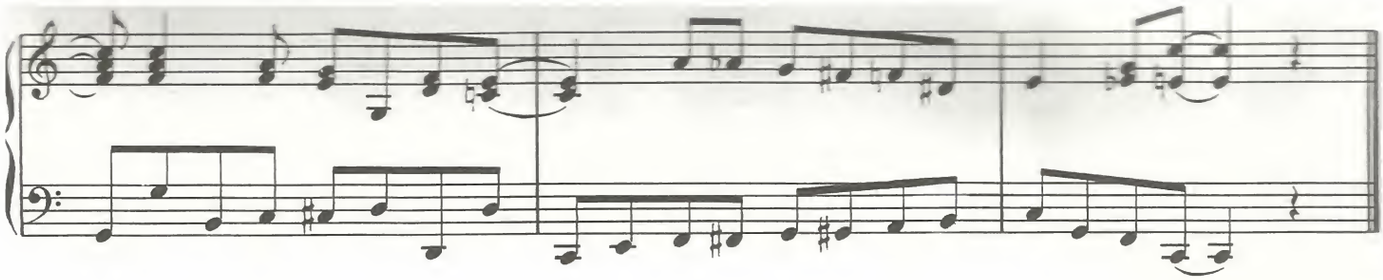

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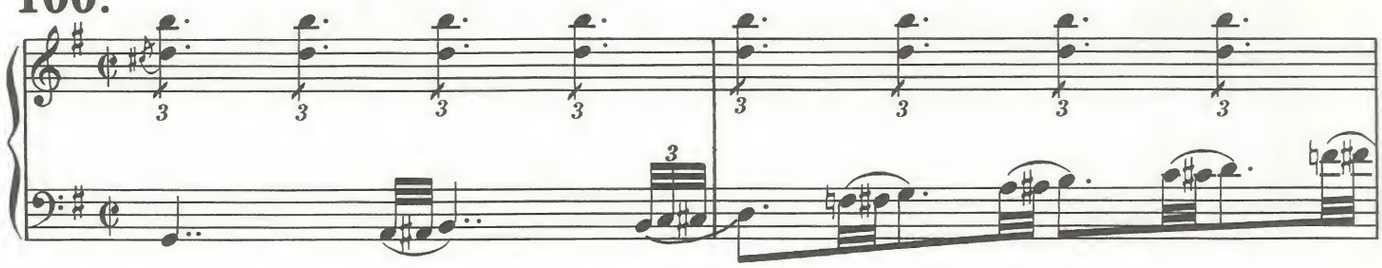

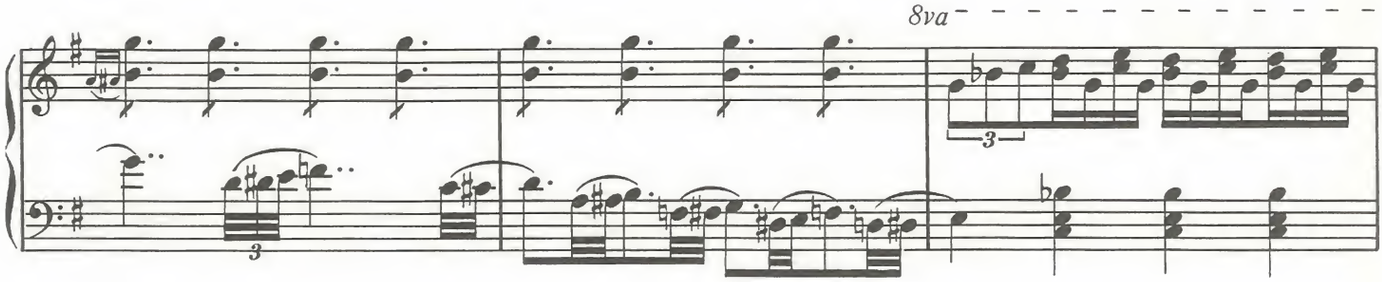

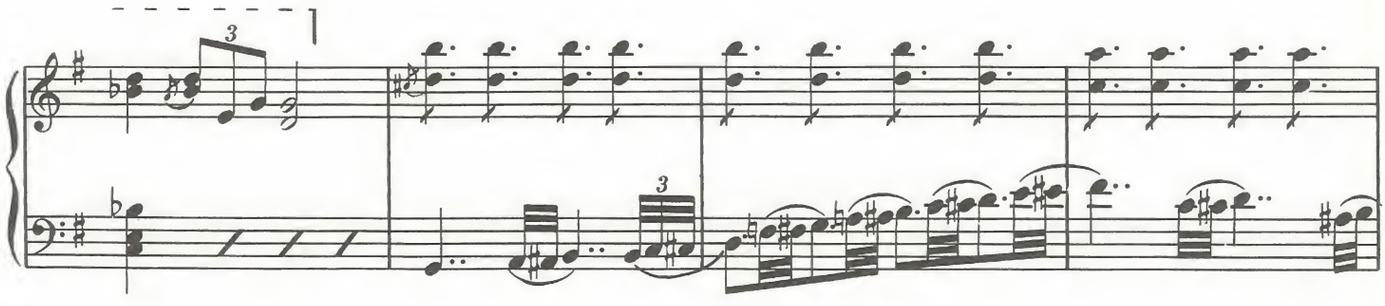

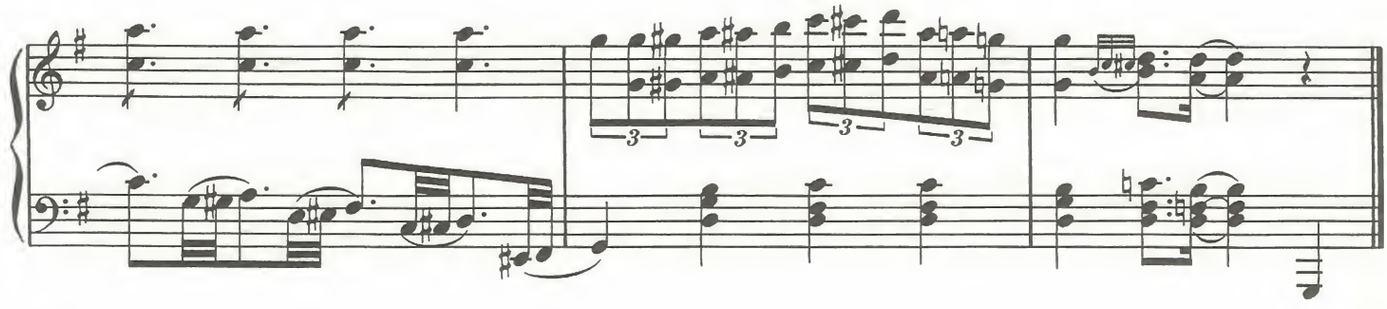

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